

# **JOHN'S GOSPEL: GOOD NEWS FOR TODAY**

David Wenham

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**GOOD NEWS FOR TODAY**

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# CHAPTER I

## The purpose of this booklet

Jesus of Nazareth, the most influential man who has ever lived, continues to be the inspiration of millions round our world. We know about him from the books of the NT (and from a few other ancient documents), and the account of his life that has probably inspired and excited more people than any other is the so-called gospel of John.<sup>1</sup>

John's gospel contains some of the most beautiful and powerful stories we know about Jesus, such as the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, some of the best known sayings of Jesus such as 'I am the way, the truth and the life', and some of the most profound and mystical teaching that we find in the Christian Scriptures, such as the opening words of the gospel about 'the word' that became flesh. John's gospel has been described as like a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant may swim<sup>2</sup> – in other words simple enough for a child to enjoy and profound enough to satisfy the most demanding philosophical mind. Many, many people have come to faith in Jesus through reading or hearing John's gospel.

But what Jesus do we meet in the gospel? Modern scholars have raised all sorts of questions about the gospel as an historical account of Jesus of Nazareth. Their questions have arisen primarily from the differences between John's gospel and the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. The very name 'syn-optic' means having a common perspective, and reflects the perception that Matthew, Mark and Luke see Jesus in one way, whereas John is different.

The differences include:

- striking things found in all three synoptics and not in John, for example the baptism of Jesus, the transfiguration, Jesus' ministry of casting out demons, the institution of the Last Supper;
- remarkable things found in John and not in any of the synoptics, for example the miracle of turning water into wine, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the famous 'I am' sayings of Jesus;
- differences in chronology: for example Jesus cleanses the temple near the beginning of John's gospel but at the end of the synoptic gospels, Jesus dies after Passover in the synoptics but at Passover in John;

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<sup>1</sup> It is convenient to refer to 'John's gospel' and to 'John' as the author of the gospel, whether or not the traditional view of the gospel's authorship is justified.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by L. Morris, *The Gospel of John* (London: Marshall, 1971), p. 7.

- differences in Jesus' teaching: for example, Jesus teaches a lot about the kingdom of God in the synoptic gospels and very little in John, Jesus is a clearly divine figure in John who has come down from heaven in a way that is much less clear in the synoptics;
- differences in style and presentation: instead of the punchy parables that we find in the synoptics, we have longer discourses and dialogues in John.

Such differences and many others have persuaded a large number of scholars that what we have in John is not a historical account of Jesus of Nazareth, but a theological portrait reflecting the convictions of Christian believers who lived quite a while after Jesus and in a very different environment.

Such a conclusion may be very disturbing to the Christian who supposed that Jesus really did say things like 'I am the way, the truth and the life', and who perhaps came to faith precisely on the basis of that assumption. It can be perturbing, also, to Christians who wish to commend Christian faith to others and who find not only that Jesus did not do all the wonderful things they thought, but also that a book from the Bible which looks historical is in fact nothing of the sort.

This booklet is an attempt to help those wanting to make sense of this book that has been, and continues to be, so important to Christians. In it I shall first sketch out some of the major themes and ideas of John's gospel: I want to do this, not just because the gospel is much more important and exciting than scholarly theories about it, but also because we need to look at the data before we come to consider scholarly assessments of it. In particular we need to clarify in what ways John is distinctive (*e.g.* from the synoptics) before we consider how his distinctives are to be explained. Needless to say, a booklet of this length is not a comprehensive textbook: I shall not try to describe every scholarly view, nor give chapter and verse for everything.

## CHAPTER 2

### What does John have to say?

If you or I were telling the story of Jesus today, we would inevitably bring out things about Jesus that are particularly important to us, or that we see as particularly important for people today to hear. The evangelists were the same, as the so-called redaction critics have told us. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have all told the story of Jesus in different ways, because all had their own agenda in writing their accounts.

John quite specifically tells what his agenda is in 20:31, 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.' This may well have been the original ending of the gospel, with ch. 21 being a sort of appendix. Whether or not it is, it sums up the gospel brilliantly. Chapter after chapter in the gospel, story after story<sup>3</sup>, may be seen as trying to help us believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that there is life in him.

So the first observation to make about John is that the gospel's focus is on the identity of Jesus. Of course, Matthew, Mark and Luke are interested in the person of Jesus too. But, whereas they give us a relatively broad-brush picture of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God and of his work, John's gospel has a narrower 'Christological' focus, probably (as we shall see) because he was in a situation where people were proposing all sorts of answers to the question: Who is Jesus?

#### a. Jesus as Jewish Messiah

So who is Jesus according to John? He is, first, 'the Christ', being the Greek translation of the Hebrew 'Messiah' (*i.e.* anointed one). By this John means that Jesus is the king from the family of David, whose coming to save God's people was predicted in various Old Testament passages (*e.g.* Is. 9:1-7, 11:1-3).

John's gospel was at one time seen by scholars as a Greek reinterpretation of Jesus and much less 'Jewish' than the synoptic gospels. But all sorts of things have persuaded scholars that John is actually a very Jewish gospel:<sup>4</sup> the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls was one factor, since the scrolls contain what may be seen as Johannine emphases (*e.g.* the emphasis on light and

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<sup>3</sup> *E.g.* that of the Samaritan woman at the well in ch. 4 or of Lazarus in ch. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have come to realise that Hellenism and Judaism were not as insulated from each other, as was once supposed. Greek ideas and ways of thinking were known and often influential within Palestinian Judaism.

darkness).<sup>5</sup> But it is evidence within the gospel that makes it most clear that John is a Jewish gospel:

- there is the interest of people in Jesus as Messiah, which is greater than in any of the synoptics. In the synoptics the emphasis on Jesus as Messiah is definitely muted, though Peter's confession of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi marks a turning-point in Jesus' ministry (Mk. 8:29). In John, however, people are openly talking about Jesus as Messiah from ch. 1 onwards (1:41, 49), and there is keen public debate about whether Jesus is Messiah or not (7:25-31, 41-44).
- there is an emphasis in Jesus' participation in the Jewish festivals in Jerusalem. Whereas the synoptics only describe the adult Jesus going up to Jerusalem for the passover at the end of his ministry, John has Jesus go up to two passovers, to the feast of tabernacles and to the feast of hanukkah (dedication).

That in itself might prove little, but it seems likely that John sees Jesus as somehow fulfilling the symbolism of those Jewish festivals: thus the feast of passover, referred to in John 6, celebrated the exodus from Egypt, and Jesus in that context speaks of himself as the true bread come down from heaven (*i.e.* as the new manna). The feast of tabernacles, referred to in John 7 and 8, involved a water-pouring ritual and a ritual with torches, and Jesus in that context speaks of himself as the one who gives drink to the thirsty and as the light of the world (7:37, 8:12). Something rather similar is probably going on in the story of the wedding in ch. 2, where Jesus miraculously changes the water from the jars 'used by the Jews for purification' into wonderful wine. In each case the symbolism is probably that Jesus as God's Son fulfils the Jewish religion.

- John frequently portrays Jesus in conflict with 'the Jews' in a way that suggests that Jewish issues are still very much alive for the author (*e.g.* in ch. 9); he is not writing in a purely Hellenistic/Gentile environment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The evidence has so impressed some scholars that they have speculated that the author of the gospel was once an Essene, the Essenes being the group usually associated with the Scrolls.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars have debated the precise force of John's 'the Jews', and some have suggested that John comes close to anti-Semitism. (For this view see notably M. Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* [London & New York: Routledge, 1996].) But, despite the terminology and the vehemence of the language used in referring to the Jews (*e.g.* in 8:44, where they are called children of the devil), John writes, as we have seen, from a Jewish perspective, and he believes that 'salvation is of the Jews' (4:22), Jesus being the Jewish Messiah.

It is also worth saying that strongly expressed opposition to those seen to be in the wrong is typical in debates between different Jews (from the Old Testament period and onwards); in the synoptic gospels as well as in John the Jews accuse Jesus of being in league with the devil (*eg* Mark 3:22, John 8:48), and Jesus can himself describe his friend and disciple Peter as 'Satan', when he opposes his God-given mission (Mark 8:33). On these issues see especially S. Motyer, *Your Father the Devil* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997).

But, despite the terminology, John writes, as we have seen, from a Jewish perspective himself, and he believes that 'salvation is of the Jews' (4:22), Jesus being the Jewish Messiah.

## b. Jesus as divine Son

But, if John wants us to believe that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, he goes much further than that in seeking to demonstrate that Jesus is also 'the Son of God'. The other gospels teach this as well: thus in Mark Jesus calls God 'Abba, Father' and speaks of himself in the parable of the vineyard as the beloved son of the vineyard owner (14:35, 12:6, *cf.* 13:32); in Matthew and Luke Jesus comments: 'No one knows the Father except the Son and no one knows the Son except the Father and anyone to whom the Son reveals him' (Mt. 11:27/Lk. 10:22). But John emphasizes Jesus as 'the Son' much more than the other gospel-writers, and makes it clear that Jesus is 'Son of God' in a very strong sense. In the Old Testament the king may be spoken of as son of God (2 Sa. 7), and in the New Testament so may every Christian (Gal. 4:4-7, admittedly only through a relationship with Jesus). But John uniquely has Jesus speak of himself as one who 'descended from heaven', who was with the Father in the beginning before the world began (3:13, 17:24). Jesus in John can say 'Before Abraham was, I am ...', and be rewarded by his opponents seeking to kill him for blasphemy (8:58, 59). To use a technical term, Jesus in John's gospel is 'pre-existent', in a way that is not explicit in the synoptic gospels.

In trying to define how exactly John understood Jesus' divinity we should not assume that he had the sort of Trinitarian understanding that Christians subsequently worked out. One important category that he does use to identify Jesus is the category of 'the word' (Greek *logos*). This comes out in the majestic, almost poetic prologue to the gospel in ch. 1:1-18.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have debated the significance and origin of John's term: it has been seen as a thoroughly Greek term, since Stoic philosophers, among others, spoke of a logical principle of order – *logos* can mean 'word' or 'reason' – at the heart of the universe. But it is also a thoroughly Jewish concept, since the OT speaks of God creating the world by 'his word' and of his word powerfully accomplishing his will (Is. 55:11, Ps. 33:6). If we have to choose between a Greek and a Jewish background for John's concept of 'the word', it is almost certainly the Jewish background that should win: the opening words of the prologue 'in the beginning' and the subsequent reference to 'light in darkness' remind us inevitably of Genesis 1, where God's creative word is so powerful. Furthermore, the whole idea of God creating through the agency of his word is reminiscent of various Jewish texts which speak of divine wisdom as God's creative agent (eg Pr. 8, Wisdom 8).

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<sup>7</sup> Some scholars have proposed that the prologue was not originally part of the gospel, but was a poem that was added to the gospel by the author at some point. Although that is possible, it is such a powerful introduction to the gospel and so much in keeping with the emphases of the gospel that the proposal has little attraction.

But perhaps we don't have to choose. It is possible that John has chosen a term which spoke evocatively to Greeks and Jews alike; we might compare the efforts of the first-century Alexandrian philosopher Philo, who tried to synthesize Jewish and Greek thought, and who spoke of the divine *logos* as God's instrument in creation (though without identifying that *logos* with a person).

However, arguably more important than the background, is the function of the term 'logos' for John. For John Jesus is the word of God, because he is God's way of communicating with us. The speech-bubble in modern cartoons expresses the idea that a person's words go out from that person towards other people: my word comes out from my mouth, expresses something of me, and reaches out to you, if you are listening. In one sense my word is part of me; in another sense, when it goes out, it takes on a life independent of me, and these days it may be captured on a tape-recorder, and even transmitted via a satellite to the other side of the world. For John Jesus comes out from God, and communicates with us. In other words: Jesus reveals God. 1:18 is important at this point: 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.' The Greek word translated 'he has made him known' could be translated 'he has explained him', and what John is saying is that if we want to know what God is like, look at and listen to Jesus. The Jews had a ban on making any image of God; they believed that any image would be a distortion. But Jesus, according to John, is a true revelation of God, and he can say 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (14:9). He is the visible word of God, come in flesh.<sup>8</sup>

One of the questions that has most engaged readers of John, from the early church fathers up to the most modern scholars, is: how does John understand the relationship of 'the Father' and 'the Son': is the Son God in the sort of way the creeds would later speak of him? Or is he simply a human agent through whom the divine life shines, one with the Father in purpose and love, but not in his being and nature? Jewish thought could speak in very strong terms about the authority of someone's agent and representative, and in John's gospel Jesus is 'sent' by the Father, and is dependent on and obedient to him (e.g. 5:19, 36f., 7:29, 57). He can also speak of the Father as 'greater than I' (14:28). And yet Jesus in John seems much more than God's agent: when he says in 8:58 'Before Abraham was, I am', he both asserts his pre-existence, but also in using the expression 'I am' speaks of himself in a way that recalls the Old Testament's way of speaking

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<sup>8</sup> Jewish mystical thought of the first century speculated about figures such as Moses and Enoch ascending into God's presence and receiving special revelations of God. For John Jesus is the only one who comes from God's presence and reveals God.

about God.<sup>9</sup> The implication, which his opponents recognize (as they seek to stone him), is that Jesus is claiming something that would be blasphemous for any human being (8:59). Human beings, who receive Jesus, are 'children of God' (1:12), but Jesus is uniquely the Son, not by rebirth but from the beginning; thus he can work on the sabbath, as God does, but as no human being should (5:17). Thus Thomas at the end of ch. 20 can worship the risen Jesus as 'My Lord and my God', which is an appropriate climax to John's gospel, but would be quite inappropriate for one who was not really divine.<sup>10</sup>

### **c. Reasons for believing: signs and witnesses**

But why ever should anyone believe that Jesus the Galilean was divine? The answer for John comes in his important 20:30, 31: 'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples ... these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God.' It is the miracles of Jesus for John that are signs – signposts, we might say – of his divinity. He has seven (or eight) miracle stories: the turning of the water to wine (ch. 2) , the healing of the nobleman's son (ch. 4), the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda (ch. 5), the feeding of the 5000 and the walking on the water (ch. 6), the restoration of sight to the man born blind (ch. 9), the raising of Lazarus (ch. 11); finally there is Jesus' own resurrection.

The synoptic gospels also contain plenty of miracle stories, of course. But, as so often, John has a rather different angle on things: not only does he have a rather distinctive collection of rather distinctive miracles (with the feeding of the 5000 and the walking on the water being the only ones in common with the synoptics),<sup>11</sup> but he also presents the miracles with a particular slant. In the synoptics the miracles are evidence of and indeed part of the coming of the kingdom of God: the OT promised a new day of God's salvation, and Jesus brings it by opening the eyes of the blind and healing the lame. John also understands the miracles in that way: thus Jesus' turning the water of Jewish purification into wedding-wine is highly suggestive of Jesus bringing God's new day, and the other miracles too give insight into the salvation that Jesus is bringing. But what is special about John's perspective is that he sees the miracles primarily as revealing who Jesus is and as evidence for believing in Jesus. So, after describing the water turned to wine, John comments: 'He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him'

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<sup>9</sup> See Ex. 3:14, also the 'I am he' of Is. 40-55, *e.g.* 41:4, translated in the Greek Septuagint as 'I am'.

<sup>10</sup> So in John Jesus is distinct from the Father, and yet 'one' with him not just 'functionally', but 'ontologically' (to use scholars' terminology). To ask further how John understands the relationship may be to ask something that John doesn't answer. We may need to content ourselves with his picture of 'the word': as we saw, my word comes out of my inner being, is in one sense a part of me and yet has a life and power of its own.

<sup>11</sup> It is notable also that he describes no exorcisms, though interestingly he speaks of Jesus' death as the driving out of Satan in 12:31.

(2:11). The glory in question is the glory of the only Son of God, which has been referred to in 1:14. The miracles are signs of God's glory, indeed are works of God, which should lead to a response of faith (10:25).

The distinctive thing about John's view of the miracles is that they are explicitly (not implicitly as in the synoptics) 'christological', pointing to who Jesus is. And it is not just the miracles: John speaks of various people and things 'witnessing' to Jesus – the miracles are such witnesses, but so are John the Baptist, Moses, the Scriptures, as well as God himself (*e.g.* ch. 5). Like the miracles, the other witnesses 'testify about me' (5: 39, 46). Jesus' followers are also to be his witnesses through the Holy Spirit (15:26, 27), and John sees his own gospel in that category: it is witness which is true and is designed to lead to belief – belief in Jesus as Son of God (*e.g.* 19:35). People may refuse to believe, but that is because of culpable blindness, not because of deficient evidence (5:40, 47, 9:41, 12:37, 40).

#### **d. Is Jesus human in John?**

John's portrayal of Jesus as divine is so strong, that some scholars have doubted whether John's Jesus is really human. They have spoken of John as tending to 'docetism' – docetism being the second century heresy which asserted that Jesus only appeared (Greek *dokei*) to be human.<sup>12</sup> It is easy to see why John's Jesus could be viewed this way: he is, as we have seen, a divine figure who 'comes down' from heaven; he makes divine claims and has divine powers, turning water into wine, knowing the life-story of a stranger when he meets her at the well in Samaria, raising the dead.

Most striking of all is John's account of the death of Jesus, when this is compared with the account of the synoptics. In Mark's gospel Jesus suffers intensely: in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest he is in agony and begs God that he should not have to face death; the disciples fail him and run away; and eventually he is crucified and utters a cry of despair, as it seems: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (14:34-52, 15:34). In John on the other hand Jesus seems in total control in Gethsemane: when soldiers come to arrest him, he asks who they are looking for. They reply 'Jesus of Nazareth'. Jesus then replies 'I am' (literally in the Greek), and the arresting party then fall to the ground – as one might when confronted with the divine 'I am'. Then Jesus continues to control the situation, telling the guards to let the disciples go (18:1-8). At his trial Jesus is seen to be the king with even more authority than the Roman governor, Pilate, and, when he dies, his cry is not one of despair, but of victory or completion – 'It is finished' (19:30).

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<sup>12</sup> See notably E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London:SCM,1968).

So is it right to conclude that John's Jesus is not human? Against this is the key statement in 1:14, where John specifically says that 'the word became *flesh*'. The word 'flesh', which is used also in ch. 6:51-59 where Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, sounds distinctly un-docetic. The Greek suggests a real flesh and blood person, and the Jesus of John, though so divine, has what seem to be normal human attributes – getting tired (4:6), feeling sadness and shedding tears (11:35), being thirsty (19:28, *cf.* 4:7). It is quite true that John emphasizes that Jesus is really victorious not vanquished at the cross, but it is clearly a real crucifixion that is described, as the readers would have realised. And, although there is less sense of struggle in John than in the synoptics, still Jesus is troubled at the prospect of his death (12:27); and his laying down of his life is a hugely costly sacrifice on his part, as is made clear when Jesus speaks of the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep and of a man laying down his life for his friends (ch. 10). It is doubtful if an ancient reader, familiar with the gory business of crucifixion, would see in John's story what the modern critic comparing the text of John and Mark sees. The ancient reader might indeed be impressed with Jesus' calm control, but the proper conclusion would not be that Jesus did not suffer, but that Jesus' glory is seen in how he conquers in and through so dire a situation.

It is arguable, in fact, that John is doing almost exactly the opposite to what has been suggested by scholars: *i.e.* that he is glorifying the cross not to diminish or eliminate the idea of Jesus' suffering, but rather to counter some of his contemporaries who had little or no place for the cross in their theology.<sup>13</sup> John on this view wants to affirm its climactic importance in the mind of Jesus and the purpose of God.

#### **e. The death of Jesus: atonement in John?**

Before leaving John's picture of Jesus' death, it is worth noting that scholars have not only claimed that John portrays a suffering-free crucifixion, but also that John does not see Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice for sin, as do Mark and Matthew (*e.g.* Mk.10:45). In John it is simply a victory. To this we may respond that John does indeed stress that the cross is a victory: it is a victory over Satan, who is called 'the ruler of this world' (14:30). The picture is of Satan having hijacked God's world, and of Jesus in the cross confronting Satan and Satan confronting Jesus. The confrontation is a dark moment, but the outcome is 'the judgment of this world' (*i.e.* of Satan's kingdom) and the 'casting out of Satan' (12:32). The gospel which fails to

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<sup>13</sup> Note how in 1 Jn. the author contends with people who were happy with a Jesus who came by water and in spiritual power, but not with 'the blood', 5:6,7. (See further below). John may in his own rather different way be doing what Mark seems to do in his gospel, making the cross the climax of his gospel and of Jesus' ministry: Mark has the temple curtain torn in two and the Gentile centurion confessing Jesus as Son of God; John's Gentiles come into the picture in 12:20-33, where again the death of Jesus is portrayed as for all the world.

describe any of Jesus' individual exorcisms still has the idea of Jesus casting out the evil cosmic ruler through his death.

This is indeed a notable emphasis in John. But how does Jesus cast out Satan through the cross? John may not answer that directly, but he gives a host of clues. For example, he sees Jesus as the new Passover lamb: that is probably the sense of John the Baptist's words about Jesus in 1:29, 36, 'Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'; it is almost certainly in mind when John makes the point that Jesus' bones were not broken in the crucifixion, citing the Old Testament law about not breaking the bones of the passover lamb (19:36, *cf.* Ex 12:46). John brings out very clearly that Jesus died at passover time, and some see this as the explanation of one of the great puzzles to do with John and the synoptics.

The puzzle is that the synoptics suggest that Jesus' last supper with his disciples was a passover meal, whereas John suggests that Jesus died before the passover meal (18:28, 19:31). Scholars have proposed that John altered the synoptic chronology in order to make Jesus' death coincide chronologically with the killing of the passover lambs, which obviously preceded the passover meal. If they are right, then this would underline the importance of the passover for John, and also reinforce the view that John was less interested in historical accuracy than in theological exposition. However, they are probably not right: there are various other possible explanations of the divergence of John and the synoptics, all of which suggest in one way or another that there were different 'passover' meals around the time of the crucifixion:

- some scholars have argued that Jesus actually held a passover-type meal ahead of the official passover, because he anticipated his arrest;
- others have noted that different Jewish groups had different religious calendars, so that people will have celebrated the feast on different days;
- others have argued that Jesus celebrated the passover on the officially appointed day, and that when John speaks of the Jews preparing to eat the passover after the crucifixion, he is referring not to the first night of the week-long feast when the passover lamb was eaten, but to other meals in that week.

It is not clear which of these views is correct, but all of them are more plausible than the view that John unilaterally altered the received traditions about the time of the crucifixion in order to make Jesus more clearly the passover lamb. He did not need to make the change in order to make the point, and had he done so, we might have expected him to have drawn our attention more explicitly to it. Instead, he makes the point subtly but clearly.

To revert to the question of the atonement in John: John may not spell out his atonement theology, but he uses all sorts of images, which show that he sees Jesus' death as a saving sacrifice. Thus Jesus through his death is the passover lamb, who brings liberation. He is like the bronze snake lifted up by Moses to save the sinful Israelites from divine plague and judgement (Nu. 21:9). He is the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep (ch. 10).

He is also the one who 'gives his flesh for the life of the world' (6:51). Chapter 6 is one of the most fascinating passages in John. It starts with Jesus feeding the 5000, and then this miracle is followed up, in typically Johannine style, with a discussion of Jesus as the bread who has come down from heaven, the bread that surpasses the old manna in its importance and saving effects. 'I am the bread of life', Jesus says, 'he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst' (v. 35). The clear message, which is constantly affirmed in John, is that Jesus is the one who gives life, and that the way to receive it is to believe in him. The discussion, however, takes a new turn in v.51, where Jesus speaks of giving his flesh for the life of the world, and then of the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. What seems to happen at this point in the chapter is that Jesus, having spoken up to this point in general terms of himself as the living bread, now specifically refers to his death on the cross as what brings life.<sup>14</sup> He has spoken earlier about believing in him and coming to him, and this in context is how we must understand 'eating' the flesh and 'drinking' the blood: Jesus is saying that faith in his saving death is necessary for eternal life.

#### **f. Jesus' death, the last supper and the eucharist**

One of the interesting questions raised by the verses that speak of the flesh and blood of Jesus is how they relate, if at all, to the last supper, as described by the synoptics, where Jesus invites his disciples to eat 'my body' and to drink 'my blood'.<sup>15</sup> Has John transplanted the words from their synoptic context into his ch. 6, with its thematic focus on bread, starting with the feeding of the 5000? It is possible that he has. It is equally possible that Jesus said much the same thing on more than one occasion: there is no reason at all why Jesus should not have used the striking imagery of eating his body and drinking his blood only at the last supper. The scholarly argument about the relationship of the Johannine and synoptic sayings has

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<sup>14</sup> It is almost as though we move from an incarnational emphasis – Jesus as the one who descends from heaven – to an atonement emphasis. Compare also ch. 3, where Jesus first speaks to Nicodemus about being born again, and then goes on to speak of himself as one who will be lifted up on the cross.

<sup>15</sup> M. Casey finds John's emphasis on drinking the blood of Jesus evidence of his deliberate anti-Semitism, since drinking blood was so abhorrent to Jews. But it is the same shocking imagery that Jesus uses in the synoptic Last Supper narratives, when he associates the cup of wine with 'his blood' and invites his disciples to drink it. We are dealing with powerfully parabolic language.

often been intertwined with wider discussion about John and the sacraments, and about whether 6:51-59 was meant by John to be understood to refer to the eucharist (or Lord's supper). Scholars have jumped various ways on these questions: some, for example, argue that the verses are indeed the last supper traditions that have been transplanted by John into a different context, but that he did the transplant in order to preserve the teaching about the Lord's death but to avoid a eucharistic and sacramental emphasis; others have seen in the Johannine verses a particularly strong emphasis on the necessity of participating in the sacramental elements.

Neither of these views is entirely plausible: it is very hard to see how someone wanting to downplay the eucharist and sacraments could have retained a verse like 6:53, which would so easily be understood in the opposite way.<sup>16</sup> But it is also not easy to see how John, with his overwhelming emphasis on faith as the way to eternal life, could introduce in 6:51-59 an additional and different requirement, suggesting that faith must be supplemented by sacramental participation. The most likely view is that 6:51-59 refer primarily to the death of Jesus and that the words about eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus speak pictorially of the need to have faith in his death; however, it is entirely likely that for the writer and the readers of the gospel the obvious way for the follower of Jesus to express faith in the Lord's death was through receiving the bread and wine.<sup>17</sup> So 6:51-59 would have been understood eucharistically, whether or not they are a transplant from the last supper traditions.<sup>18</sup> But John is not someone who emphasizes the sacraments rather than faith; rather he sees faith being expressed in the Lord's supper.

Whatever is concluded about the eucharistic significance (or insignificance) of 6:51-59, the verses make it clear that Jesus' death, probably understood sacrificially (hence 'flesh' and 'blood'), brings salvation. Something similar may be said about John's own account of the last supper in ch. 13, where the washing of the disciples' feet is at one level simply an astonishing example of humility, if not humiliation, on Jesus' part, but which is on another level an acted parable, through which Jesus graphically explains his coming death. It is this that makes sense of Jesus' words to Peter: 'Unless I wash you, you have no part in me' (13:8). The thought is that Jesus must wash Peter's sins

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<sup>16</sup>In any case, if eucharist and baptism may be viewed together, John has lots to say about baptism in chs. 1-4, which suggest a very positive view of baptism (e.g. 4:1,2).

<sup>17</sup>One of the important features of John's Gospel is the way the writer can see more than one layer or level of meaning in things. For example, when he speaks of Jesus being 'lifted up' in 12:32, he is thinking of the cross as a literal lifting from the ground, but also as Jesus' exaltation and pathway to glory.

<sup>18</sup>Those scholars may be right who think that John did not record the words of institution in his account of the last supper, because he had already included the relevant teaching in his ch. 6.

away through the most humiliating service of all, *i.e.* the cross, if Peter is to share in the life Jesus has come to bring.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus' death is also seen to be of supreme saving importance in a striking passage in ch. 11, where the Jewish authorities are worried about Jesus' popularity: 'If we let him go on like this ... everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.' The high priest Caiaphas then says to his colleagues: 'You know nothing at all. You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.' John makes a comment that reflects, interestingly, a Jewish view of the high priest's spiritual powers: 'He did not say this on his own accord, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation, but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one' (11:50-52). Caiaphas, of course, intends to say that eliminating Jesus will remove a potential flash-point with the Roman authorities, but John sees him as inadvertently describing the saving effects of Jesus' death. From our point of view what is interesting is the light that this throws on John's view of Jesus' death: Jesus dies so that people may not perish but have eternal life as the saved and gathered people of God (*cf.* 12:32).

It turns out that, although John does have such a strong stress on Jesus' death as victory, he sees this victory as achieved through the sacrificial and cleansing death of Jesus. Just as the synoptics see the death of Jesus as a new passover bringing liberation and the kingdom of God, as is clear from the last supper narratives and the important 'ransom' saying of Mark 10:45, so John sees the Lord's death as bringing the end of exile and dispersion for God's people, in other words as bringing eternal life.

### **g. Eternal life and eschatology**

But mentioning eternal life brings us on to consider one of the most obvious distinctives of John's gospel. John says that he has written his gospel 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have *life* in his name.' (20:31) Whereas the synoptic Jesus announces and brings the kingdom of God, in John Jesus has come to bring eternal life. It is one of the odd things about John that he only uses the phrase 'kingdom of God' twice (in 3:3, 5), whereas he continually talks about life and eternal life. It is as though the tables are turned completely: with kingdom of God

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<sup>19</sup> Compare the thought of Mark 10:45. M. Casey's suggestion that John has replaced a Jewish Passover with a Gentile baptism is entirely unpersuasive: the footwashing makes excellent sense in a Palestinian meal context; the meaning of the symbolic action in John's supper is very similar to that of the synoptic eucharist; and, if there are baptismal allusions (as is possible), these too fit Jesus' Palestinian context perfectly well.

being the dominant theme in the synoptics and 'eternal life' being very much subsidiary (e.g. Mark 10:30), but with the opposite being the case in John.

At first sight this looks like one of the clearest evidences that John is less historical than the synoptics, John having substituted an idea – eternal life – that would be accessible to Greek readers for the distinctly Jewish idea of the reign of God. However, the difference turns out to be less significant than it might seem, when we explore the meaning of eternal life in John.

For John eternal life is the opposite of 'perishing' or being destroyed, as is clear from the famous John 3:16. John believed in divine judgement – it is an important theme in his gospel<sup>20</sup> – and for him the importance of believing in Jesus is because everyone will appear before the judgement seat of God, with believers being saved and others dying 'in their sins' (8:24). John compares the Israelites in the Sinai desert who experienced divine judgement in the form of fatal snake-bites, but who were saved by looking at the bronze snake put on a pole by Moses: so the lifted up Jesus on the cross is the way to life out of death.

But, if eternal life is, negatively, the opposite of death, what is it positively? John might well choose to answer that by referring us to his description of what Jesus does for people, since he is very clear that Jesus brings life to people. The famous 'I am' sayings of John's gospel make that point: 'I am the way and the truth and the life', 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the resurrection and the life'. Those sayings in themselves may suggest something of how John sees the life that Jesus brings, but so may the stories of Jesus' work: for example, the story of the water turned to wine in ch. 2 may be seen as a picture of the eternal life that Jesus brings; so in 10:10 Jesus can speak of 'life in all its fullness'. Eternal life is like bread satisfying hungry people; so Jesus can say 'he who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty' (6:35). It is like Lazarus being dramatically raised from the dead, *i.e.* something that overcomes the sadness and finality of death.

But John does not simply give us vivid pictures of what eternal life is. In 17:3 he gives us a definition: 'This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'. 'Knowing' here is not to be understood as academic or theoretical knowledge, but in personal terms, as when we say: 'I know so and so'. In English we can distinguish 'being acquainted with someone' and really 'knowing them', and the sort of knowledge that John has in mind is something much more than acquaintance. In the OT Adam is said to 'know' Eve his wife, the reference being to sexual

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<sup>20</sup> Scholars, notably A.E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial* (London: SPCK, 1976), have seen the whole of John's gospel as a trial narrative, with Jesus being put on trial by 'the Jews' but with Jesus himself actually judging 'the world'.

intercourse (Gn. 4:1); and the same use of the word 'know' is found in Matthew's gospel of Joseph and Mary (Mt. 1:25). In John 17:3 there is no sexual connotation, but the knowledge of God referred to is a strong, even intimate relationship with God. In 14:23 Jesus says: 'If a person loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our home with him.' This is what eternal life is for John: having a loving relationship of fellowship with the Father and with Jesus.

The word translated 'home' in 14:23 is literally 'abiding or dwelling place', and is related to the word used in the famous passage about the vine in ch. 15, where Jesus encourages his disciples to: 'abide in me'. Eternal life in John is to be in close relationship with God. We could say that it is to be brought into the love and life of the divine family: Jesus is seen as 'abiding' in the Father in love and unity, and Jesus has come to bring other people into this wonderful family relationship. This fits in with what Jesus says in his famous prayer in ch. 17, where he prays for his followers to be one 'as you Father are in me, and I in you ...', and it fits in too with the strong emphasis in John's gospel on the importance of his followers 'loving one another', since eternal life is all to do with sharing in the divine life and the divine love.

John's gospel has sometimes been seen as a rather individualistic gospel: individuals need to believe and may thus be assured of life in heaven. This has been seen as a rather different emphasis from what we find in the synoptic gospels with their focus on the coming of the kingdom of God. But in fact eternal life in John is seen to be shared life – with God and with each other. It is life in the one flock under the one shepherd, it is being a branch in the true vine (chs. 10, 15). We noticed how John describes the death of Jesus as being 'for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation, but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.' (11:52, *cf.* 12:32). This is what eternal life is in John.

It turns out that eternal life in John is not the Greek idea of the survival of the individual soul beyond death, but is a strongly Jewish idea: the pictures of the vine and the shepherd are Old Testament ideas associated with Israel (*e.g.* Ps. 80:14-16, Is. 5:1-7, Ezk. 34). The idea of God gathering his divided and scattered people into one is a prominent theme in the OT prophets. So too the concept of God's restored people 'knowing God' is found in the OT in that most famous passage in Jeremiah 31, where God promises a new covenant written on people's hearts: 'No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother saying "Know the Lord", because all of them will know me from the least of them to the greatest.' (31:31-34.). John believes that Jesus has come to bring this new covenant, this new day. So Jesus can say to the Samaritan woman at the well: 'Believe me, woman, that the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain [*i.e.* Gerizim, the Samaritans' traditional place of worship], nor in

Jerusalem ... but the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.' (4:21-23). Jesus is not here making a generalized statement about inward religion being superior to worship in particular places, but he is announcing the coming of the day promised by Jeremiah and other prophets, when God would do a new work in people's hearts.

The same is probably the background to John 3, where Jesus tells the Jewish leader Nicodemus that he needs to be 'born again of water and the Spirit'. The most likely background to this is in an OT passage like Ezekiel 36, where God promises: 'I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities ... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you, and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws ... you will be my people, and I will be your God.' (36:24-28). Jesus, in speaking to Nicodemus, is in effect saying that this day spoken of by the prophets has now come, and that Nicodemus needs to get in on it: he needs to be part of the gathered people of God (= eternal life), and for this to happen he needs to be cleansed and given a new heart, *i.e.* to be born again, by the Spirit of God.

#### **h. A note on water and baptism**

Scholars have discussed the meaning of 'being born of water ...' in John 3:5. It very probably does pick up on a passage like Ezekiel 36; but does it also refer to baptism? Is baptism the way for Nicodemus and others to be 'sprinkled with clean water...and cleansed from impurities'? Some Protestants, wary of Catholic sacramentalism, tend to deny this: they argue that John could not be suggesting that baptism is essential to being born again, since this would contradict John's unambiguous emphasis on saving faith, and they offer various other explanations of the 'water'. Some suggest that the 'water' is a reference to natural birth<sup>21</sup>, others that it is simply a figurative way of referring to spiritual cleansing, others that it is a reference to the Holy Spirit, since in 7:38, 39 the Spirit and water are associated. However, there is a very good case for seeing the water as baptism: John 3 comes in the middle of a section of John's gospel where there has been a lot of discussion of John's baptism and of Jesus' baptizing people (from 1:33 - ch. 4). Most strikingly in 4:1, 2 Jesus and his disciples are said to 'make disciples' by baptizing people.

To say that John may see the 'water' in 3:5 as baptism is not to suggest that John is watering down(!) his emphasis on faith: on the contrary, for John

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<sup>21</sup> The reference could be to the waters of the mother's womb; or male semen was sometimes described as 'water'.

baptism is the way for someone like Nicodemus to express one's faith in Jesus. Baptism in the modern church has often got separated from conversion, by baptists as well as by infant baptists; and adults when they want to come to Jesus are told to 'pray a prayer in their hearts' and perhaps also to come forward to the front of a meeting to meet up with counsellors. But in the early church it seems that the person wanting to put their faith in Jesus was told there and then to come for baptism (Acts 2:38). So baptism was not an empty or magical ritual, but a powerfully meaningful act of faith, full of joy and a sense of the Holy Spirit's presence (as often happens in modern conversion). John's readers, many of whom are likely to have experienced adult conversion and baptism, will surely have understood Jesus' words to Nicodemus as baptismal.<sup>22</sup>

### **i. Eternal life and the kingdom of God**

Whether or not Nicodemus' water is baptismal, the OT background to John 3:5 in passages like Ezekiel 36 is hard to miss. And what follows from this, once again, is that the background to John's teaching about eternal life (and in this case to being 'born again') is much more Hebraic and OT than is often recognized, and that it is much closer to the synoptic teaching about the kingdom of God than one might suppose.<sup>23</sup> In the synoptics the kingdom of God that Jesus announces is the coming of the rule and salvation of God promised in the OT prophets, including, of course, the coming of Jeremiah's new covenant. Eternal life in John is similarly life of the new age.

Indeed the word 'eternal' may have that very connotation. In English 'eternal' suggests everlastingness, and the Greek word *aionios* can mean the same. However, it is quite likely that the Aramaic phrase used by Jesus was, literally translated, 'life of the age', meaning 'life of the coming age'.<sup>24</sup> This, as we have seen, is precisely how John understands the phrase. Not that John would exclude the idea of eternal life being everlasting; on the contrary, the story of Lazarus and Jesus' saying 'I am the resurrection' make it clear that this is an important dimension of eternal life, but for John eternal life is much more than deathlessness: it is something much richer, focussing on a relationship of love and unity with God, with Jesus and with other believers. This is life in its fullness, and in synoptic terms it is life in the kingdom of God.

### **j. The Holy Spirit**

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<sup>22</sup> Our earlier comment about John's use of phrases with more than one meaning may well be significant in this context.

<sup>23</sup> The notion of 'being born again' may have had some interesting cultural resonances for John's Greek-speaking readers. But the idea has its roots in the Old Testament (*not* in the mystery religions, like Mithraism) and has parallels in the synoptic teaching of Jesus (e.g. Mark 10:14,15).

<sup>24</sup> The Jews distinguished this present evil age from the coming age of salvation.

We have already hinted at the importance of the Holy Spirit for John, and it is necessary to look more closely at this now, since one of the distinctive things about John is that he has so much more teaching about the Spirit than the synoptics.

We have seen that for John Jesus is the one who has brought the day promised in OT passages, like Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, that speak of God doing a new work in people's hearts. Ezekiel 36 speaks of the Spirit of God in that respect. In the OT the Spirit is typically seen as the 'wind' or 'breath' of God, that comes mightily on many of the leaders of God's people, judges (like Samson), kings (like Saul and David), prophets (like Elisha and Ezekiel).<sup>25</sup>

If that is the OT experience of the Spirit, the OT prophetic hope is, on the one hand, for renewed Spirit-inspired leadership: thus the famous Isaiah 61 speaks of one 'anointed' by the Spirit and bringing good news to the poor. But, on the other hand, the OT looks forward to a universal experience of the Spirit, with all God's people, not just the leaders, being given 'a new heart' (so Ezk. 36); most famously Joel speaks of God's Spirit being poured on all flesh and even the men servants and the maid servants prophesying (2:28-32).

John sees Jesus as the new Spirit-endowed leader (1:32). He also sees Jesus as bringing the universal experience of the Spirit to all believers; indeed the giving of the Spirit seems an almost interchangeable idea with that of eternal life. And this is understandable given John's view of eternal life as fellowship with the Father and the Son, since it is precisely through the Holy Spirit that the Father and the Son come to dwell with the believer. This is clear from John 14, where Jesus at one moment promises that to those who love him and keep his commandments he and the Father will come, and 'we will make our home with him' (v. 23), and at another moment he says 'If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth.' (vs. 15-17).

One may suppose that John thought of the disciples in Jesus' lifetime as experiencing eternal life just by being with Jesus (since eternal life is fellowship with the Father and the Son), but the fuller experience is dependent on Jesus' death. It is Jesus' death that brings cleansing and eternal life, and it is Jesus' death that brings the experience of the Holy Spirit (7:38, 39). Paradoxically it is Jesus' going away that enables Jesus to come back through the Holy Spirit, and this is eternal life.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> E.g. Jdg. 14:6, 1 Sa. 10:5-11 (note the description of Saul being turned into 'another man'), 16:13, 2 Ki. 2:9,15.

<sup>26</sup> It is after his death in Jn. 20:22 that the risen Jesus 'breathes on/in' the disciples and says 'receive

For John the Holy Spirit is very much associated with Jesus: he is the agent of Jesus, as Jesus is the agent of the Father; he witnesses to Jesus and reveals him; like Jesus he is a 'paraclete' or counsellor to the disciples (see chs. 14-16 especially). The Greek word *parakletos* could be translated 'encourager', but may well have legal connotations and suggest a legal 'advocate' who stands with his client when under trial.

At first sight this all sounds rather different from the synoptic gospels, where the Holy Spirit has a very much less prominent role than in John, and where he is not called 'paraclete' or 'Spirit of truth', as he is in John. However, the difference is not as deep as it might at first appear: the synoptics agree that Jesus is the Spirit-filled anointed-one, who fulfils passages such as Isaiah 61 and who works by the Holy Spirit, for example in casting out demons (*e.g.* Mt. 12:28, Mk. 3:29, Lk. 4:18). The synoptics also agree that Jesus is the one 'who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit', bringing in the new covenant through his death (*e.g.* Mk. 1:8, 14:24). Just as in John the eternal life brought by Jesus has to do with the Spirit, so in the synoptics the kingdom of God comes through the working of the Spirit (*e.g.* Mt. 12:28). The synoptics do not use the word 'paraclete', but do speak of the Holy Spirit aiding the followers of Jesus in times of trial and giving them the words to speak (*e.g.* Mt. 10:20, Mk. 13:11).

John's view of the Spirit turns out not to be so different from that of the synoptics, though John has much more teaching about the Spirit, bringing out particularly the Spirit's role in continuing the work of Jesus after his departure.

#### **k. Future hope?**

Another matter in which John is often thought to be very different from the synoptics is in his eschatology, or, as some scholars might say, lack of it! Whereas the synoptics have Jesus and his disciples praying 'Your kingdom come', and looking forward eagerly to the triumphant coming of the Son of man on the clouds, for John there is little emphasis on a future judgement day: eternal life has come already for those who have faith (3:18, 5:24). Scholars speak of John's 'realised eschatology'. It has been argued that John lived at a time when the church was having to adjust to Jesus' failure to return (to the so-called failure of the *parousia*), and that he chose to

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the Holy Spirit'. The description is reminiscent of Gn. 2:7 where God breathes his creative life into Adam. Scholars and readers of John have wondered how the Johannine description of Jesus breathing into the disciples on Easter day relates to Acts' description of the day of Pentecost: some have suspected Luke and John have described the same experience differently (and in a way that is historically contradictory); others have argued that the disciples had two separate experiences of the Spirit. The simpler view that does justice to both John and Acts is to see the incident in John as Jesus giving the disciples an acted parable or sign of what they were to experience at Pentecost, just as the last supper was an acted parable of the Lord's death.

emphasize Jesus' spiritual presence in the church through the Holy Spirit rather than his future return: Jesus did promise to 'come again', but did so in the person of the Spirit.

This view could help to explain John's emphasis on the Spirit. But it is certainly an oversimplification to say that John has replaced the future hope of the synoptics with an emphasis on the present.<sup>27</sup> In the first place, we must not underestimate the emphasis on the present in the synoptics: there is a very strong stress in all three of them on the exciting presence of the new age in Jesus (e.g. Mt. 13:16, 17, Lk. 4:21). But in the second place, there is future hope in John. In ch. 21 there is a discussion of whether the beloved disciple would live till the future coming of Jesus; and earlier in the body of the gospel Jesus speaks of coming back to take his disciples 'so that you may be where I am' (14:1-3). He also refers to the judgement of the Son of man, 'when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice, and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, but those who have done bad to the resurrection of judgement.' (5:28, 29).

John can speak of eternal life now, which is entirely understandable given his definition of eternal life as fellowship with the Father and the Son. But especially in chs. 14-17, where Jesus looks forward to the time after his departure and speaks at length of the sufferings that his disciples will have to endure, it is very clear that the church's experience of the Holy Spirit is not full eschatological salvation. Without stretching what John says, we could reasonably say that eternal life has three phases in John:

- it begins in the ministry of Jesus as the disciples have fellowship with him;
- it continues in a new dimension after his departure through the indwelling of the Spirit;
- and it will be complete in the future when the disciples have come through their troubles and see the divine glory which Jesus had before the foundation of the world.

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<sup>27</sup> It is sometimes claimed that John has replaced a Hebraic 'horizontal' dualism that contrasts this age with the next by a Greek 'vertical' dualism that contrast 'below' and 'above'. It is true that John does emphasize Jesus as a heavenly figure who has come down from above, but we have seen that the horizontal idea of the new age is very important to him indeed.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Why is John so different? Theology rather than history?**

Our bird's eye view of John's gospel has been very selective, but I hope that it has brought out some of the brilliance of John's thinking. His vision of Jesus as the divine communication (the logos) is an exciting one: the unimaginably great God who made our universe has chosen to reveal himself in the most personal and accessible form he could, *i.e.* through a wonderful, real human being. So we have seen the unseen God! His understanding of eternal life as sharing the family life of God, the Father and the Son, is something far more profound than any concept of life that just goes on and on: in a world where happiness is often supposed to derive from material prosperity, we actually know that happiness and unhappiness typically have much more to do with our personal relationships. For John the supreme good is to be in a relationship of love and unity with God and with each other.

The brilliance of John's gospel is not just to do with the ideas he presents. He presents the ideas through a vivid narrative: human scenes and colourful characters make the story of Jesus come alive.

But we must come back to the question: what sort of narrative is it? Although in our explanation of Johannine themes, we have seen that John is not nearly as different from the synoptics as is sometimes thought, still his gospel is distinctive. The fact is that John has Jesus' seven great 'I am' sayings (6:35, 8:12, 10:9, 10:11, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1), and not one of them is in any of the synoptics. The fact is that John has Jesus speak repeatedly of himself as the pre-existent Son of God who came down from heaven and that the synoptics have no explicit saying of that sort at all. The fact is that the synoptic Jesus says little about the Holy Spirit and that the Johannine Jesus says a lot. The fact is that John's Jesus engages in long dialogue-discourses rather than short parables and sayings, and that the vocabulary used by John's Jesus is different from that found in the synoptics. We could go on, referring to incidents found in John and not the synoptics (or vice versa), to the way John has Jesus going to and fro between Galilee and Jerusalem several times, whereas the synoptics have him go up to Jerusalem once in his ministry, at the end. And so on and so on.

#### **a. A free artistic retelling of the story of Jesus**

The most widely held scholarly explanation of John's distinctiveness is that his gospel is the story of Jesus told with a lot of artistic licence. People have compared Shakespeare's historical plays, and have spoken of John's gospel

as 'poetic' and/or 'charismatic' history. The phrase 'charismatic history' suggests an explanation of John's artistic licence in terms of the author's prophetic inspiration: John speaks a great deal in his gospel of the Spirit, of the Spirit leading the followers of Jesus into all truth, and of the Spirit witnessing to Jesus. And it may well be that the author of the gospel felt himself to be inspired by that Spirit to interpret Jesus in ways that would speak relevantly to his readers. We might speak of an imaginative and creative reinterpretation of Jesus that goes well beyond a literal chronicling of the ministry of Jesus; the author would insist that his portrait reflected Spirit-given and divinely authenticated insight.

We spoke of a creative reinterpretation of Jesus, and the view of many scholars would be that John knew various sayings and stories of Jesus, which he then elaborated, added to and reformulated as part of his narrative. It is as though he had a text about Jesus, and then preached a sermon on it.<sup>28</sup> Thus in his ch. 6 the feeding of the 5000 and the walking on the water are the starting-point, but John then preaches his 'sermon', in the form of a dialogue-discourse on the theme of Jesus as the bread of life. It is a typical Johannine sermon with references to Jesus as the bread who 'came down from heaven', and with Jesus' great saying 'I am the bread of life'. At the end of the chapter, arguably, John weaves in ideas taken from the story of the last supper (eating the flesh and drinking the blood), reformulating the traditions for his own purposes.

And it is not just teaching of Jesus that may have been elaborated by John; so may the stories. Thus the story of the wedding at Cana where Jesus gives wonderful wine may be John's creative way of presenting the teaching that we find early in the synoptic gospels, where Jesus parabolically compares the time of his coming to a wedding feast (in order to explain his disciples' failure to fast) and where Jesus speaks of his coming as new wine that cannot be contained in old bottles (Mk. 2:19-22). Even John's story of the raising of Lazarus may be similarly explained – as a parable turned into a narrative: thus in Lk. 16:19-31 there is a parable about a man named 'Lazarus', who when he dies is taken into the presence of Abraham; he is contrasted with a rich man who goes to hell, and with whom Abraham has a discussion about the likely effect, or rather lack of effect, of someone rising from the dead. In John this parable has been transformed into the vivid narrative that we are familiar with – about Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, being raised from the dead by Jesus – the Jesus who says in such a

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<sup>28</sup> Putting it this way is to oversimplify matters, since scholars would not generally attribute the creative reinterpretation to only one writer, but would see the Gospel of John as having evolved over a period of time, with various 'editors' having contributed to the gospel as we know it. The gospel is not one man's sermon on Jesus, but a creative synthesis of various ideas that emerged at various times in what scholars call 'the Johannine community'. See most notably for this approach R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York:Paulist, 1979).

Johannine way: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live ...' (11:25).

The picture is of a highly creative author, who is not trying to reproduce the traditional story and sayings of Jesus, but to write a new narrative, expressing how he sees Jesus, and doing so, no doubt, to speak to a particular context and particular issues. He is in effect preaching about Jesus by creatively retelling the story.

### **b. John addressing a church that has split from Judaism**

The old view that he was writing to Greeks to give a Greek interpretation of Jesus is now largely abandoned. The more common view now is that he was writing in the late first century AD, at a time when the Christians had finally been kicked out of the synagogue by the Jewish authorities. It is argued that many Christians had continued to live as Jews, albeit Christian Jews, up to this time: they were a sort of denomination within Judaism. But then came the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in AD 70, followed in about AD 90 by the Jews reorganizing their shattered community life at a council held in Jamnia in Galilee. At Jamnia the Pharisees had total control, and other Jewish groups like the Sadducees did not get a look in. As for the Christians, a new curse was introduced into the prayers said in the synagogue, this curse being directed specifically at Christians. As a result the Christians were decisively excluded from what had been the broad church of Judaism.

John is thought to have written his gospel in that situation. This explains the negative, almost hostile, way the gospel speaks of Jesus' opponents as 'the Jews' (though Jesus himself was a Jew!). It explains the references in the gospel to the Jews putting followers of Jesus 'out of the synagogue' (9:22, 16:2), something which is not referred to in the synoptics and which is unlikely to have occurred during Jesus' ministry according to many scholars. It explains what is sometimes known as the 'dualism' of John's gospel, in other words the very sharp way that Jesus and his way is set over against the way of the 'world' and 'the Jews', people are either in the 'light' of Jesus or in the 'darkness' of the devil. The Christians were feeling hurt by being pushed out by the Jews and by the Jews' unbelief, and, like many hurt and excluded groups of people, they turned in on themselves, emphasizing love for 'another' (not love for everyone), and claiming that they had the truth of God and that the Jews were blind and under God's judgement.<sup>29</sup> John's portrayal of Jesus as a divine figure come down from heaven used to be

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<sup>29</sup> Scholars speak of a 'sectarian' attitude, using the sociological concept of a sect to explain John. A sect is a splinter group that has broken away or been pushed out of a mother body (or church), and is typically characterized by claiming the truth for itself and rejecting the mother body. The Qumran community were such a first century sect.

explained by some scholars as a Greek religious idea (a divine 'redeemer myth') which John had borrowed, but other scholars now suggest that John portrays Jesus in this way in order to explain why the Jews and others failed to believe: this supernatural Jesus can only be understood by special divine revelation to people chosen by God, *i.e.* the church.<sup>30</sup>

### **c. The value of a less-than-historical John**

The conclusion for those who take this view of John is that the gospel tells us more about how the late first century church viewed Jesus than about what Jesus the prophet from Galilee was actually like. The gospel is a useful source of historical information about early Christianity, but adds very little indeed to our historical knowledge of Jesus. Consequently many modern scholars writing about the history of Jesus hardly refer to John at all.

To come to this conclusion is not necessarily to deny the religious and spiritual value of John's gospel.<sup>31</sup> But it is to say that John's gospel, although it has the form of a historical narrative, is actually something rather like what we find in the letters of the New Testament, *i.e.* an interpretation of Jesus and an explanation of his significance and relevance for a particular group of Christians living in a very different time and context from that of Jesus himself. Just as modern Christians often express their faith in Jesus in twentieth century terms, saying perhaps that Jesus is lord over evolution, lord over galaxies and black holes, and mightier than the greatest nuclear power, so John reveals how the early church interpreted Jesus in their own terms and to answer their own questions.

This is not necessarily to question the authority or truth of John's gospel. The gospel, like Paul's letters, is in the view of the Christian church an inspired and authoritative interpretation of Jesus. But what it does mean is that we cannot honestly claim that Jesus himself said or did all the things we read in John's gospel. Rather we must say that this is what Jesus meant to some of the earliest Christians, and has indeed meant to Christians ever since. Jesus may not historically have turned water into wine, but Christians from earliest times on have experienced him transforming lives in the way described in that story. In other words we today may call that story a legend, but still a legend with spiritual truth and power.

To many preachers and evangelists to call the stories of Jesus in John's gospel legends would seem disastrous. This is partly a cultural thing: our so-called scientific age has sometimes been very scornful about myths and

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<sup>30</sup> John's probable allusions to baptism (in 3:5) and to eucharist (in 6:51-55) have also been explained in this sectarian context, as John challenging secret believers on the need to identify openly with the church.

<sup>31</sup> M. Casey in his *Is John's Gospel True?* argues that John's spiritual value is totally undermined by its lack of historical truth and by its virulent anti-Semitism, as he sees it.

legends, and Christians have felt it very important to say that the Christian stories (from the story of the Garden of Eden onwards) are not mythological. However, we are perhaps becoming more open-minded on this now, with non-Christians, as well as Christians, being aware that myths and legends may convey spiritual or social truth and even be important for people today.

However, the anxiety about calling John's stories legends is not simply something cultural; it also has an important theological basis, since Christianity as a religion does have history at its heart in a way that is not true for many other religions. Christianity has always claimed that God revealed himself in a historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth, and that God provided forgiveness and eternal life for people, remarkably, through the historical death and resurrection of that man Jesus. So it would matter intensely to Christians if the history of Jesus were taken away from us, and all we were left with were legends. Some people, like the ancient gnostics, have been willing to accept an almost or entirely mythical interpretation of Christianity; in the modern era the existentialist theologian Rudolf Bultmann came very near to this position. But Christians as a whole have rejected this mythical way as heresy, and rightly so.

But for Christians to insist that the historical Jesus matters does not mean that every gospel or every gospel story must be historical. It is entirely possible to see John as a mainly theological interpretation of Jesus, but to take a very different view of the synoptic gospels. The danger with that approach, as many would see it, is that, if John is allowed to be mythical, then the other gospels might soon go the same way! However, two things may be said on that: first, the whole 'problem' of John is that his gospel is so different, and so it does not follow that seeing his gospel as highly theological will lead to the same view of the others. But, second, many scholars would go some way down the road of seeing the other gospels too as a mixture of history and theological legend, and yet still argue that behind the legends is the historical figure of Jesus, in such a way that Christian faith can still credibly claim to be founded on what he revealed and taught of God.

What does all this mean for the Christian preacher or evangelist? In practical terms it may often mean very little: the preacher may commend Jesus to people today by reading John 3 and then explaining the Christian conviction that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life'. It doesn't matter if those words are the words of the writer of the gospel rather than the words of Jesus, as seems likely. Similarly the preacher may take the story of Lazarus and speak of the resurrection hope that Jesus brought into the world, without addressing the question of whether Jesus actually and

historically said the words 'I am the resurrection and the life'. Of course, there is a question of integrity and honesty, if we give people the impression that the story of Lazarus is historical, when actually we suppose it to be a legend. But, if we preach the story in the way that we think John intended it, *i.e.* as a testimony to Christian belief about Jesus, then there is nothing dishonest in not raising the historical question every time we preach. But, of course, we need to be able and willing to explain to people how we understand what John is doing,<sup>32</sup> and to argue that, though the Lazarus story may not be historical, it is a true interpretation of the historical Jesus that has a basis in his life and ministry, most obviously in this case in the traditions of Jesus' own resurrection.<sup>33</sup> Similarly on a larger scale seeing the gospel as a whole as an edifying story rather than primarily as a historical text need not undermine the preacher's work. In recent years scholars have offered all sorts of literary readings of the gospels, bypassing historical questions but paying close attention to the structure, plot, literary techniques and dynamics of the gospels. Such readings have sometimes been implausible, but have often been perceptive and illuminating; the reader and preacher of John's gospel may learn a lot from such approaches, whether or not the gospel is viewed as historically reliable.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In other words, we need to be willing to explain the 'genre' of the gospel, the sort of literature that it is.

<sup>33</sup> It would be wrong to underestimate the difficulty of conveying this view of John to many people. People with a church background will be suspicious of scholarly approaches that do not seem to take the texts at face value and that run contrary to their own and the church's traditional reading of the gospel (quite reasonably!), and may find them upsetting. Preachers, as a result, may be tempted to live a double life – preaching as though John were historical, while believing something quite different. This is clearly undesirable: it is certainly a good idea in debated issues to give the Christian tradition preference over scholarly speculations and not to upset people's beliefs by advocating scholarly theories that are not supported by strong evidence. But it cannot be right or pastorally responsible to teach (or to imply) from the pulpit what you are convinced is untrue.

<sup>34</sup> For someone who combines a literary and a broadly historical approach see, for example M. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel*, (Cambridge, 1993).

## CHAPTER 4

### **An historical view of John's gospel**

There is no doubt that it is possible for a Christian to accept something like the view of John that we have just explained. And there is certainly a lot of truth in it: it is true, for example, that John is a fine literary artist: his stories are vivid, and full of almost humorous irony, whether in John 3 where Jesus challenges the bewildered Jewish teacher that he needs 'to be born again', or in John 4, where he takes the Samaritan woman from the question of literal water in the well, on to the question of spiritual water and spiritual worship, on to the question of her own personal messed-up life, and on to the question of who Jesus is, or in John 9 where the healed blind man taunts the Jewish authorities about their inability to make sense of his healing. It is also true that John offers us an interpretation of Jesus, not just a blind tape-recording of events. At the start of this booklet we commented that all the gospels are interpretations. And indeed any historical writing – ancient or modern – is an interpretation, with the author selecting what to describe, focusing on things that seem particularly notable, and putting things in his or her own words.<sup>35</sup>

However, the view that John has been highly creative and indeed historically inventive in his gospel, though widely held, is not definitely correct. There is no question that, at first sight, John seems to be giving us a picture of Jesus the man who worked in Galilee and Jerusalem, not to be telling us about his own later convictions concerning Jesus. Of course, this may be a naive reading of his gospel, but the question is whether the evidence usually claimed as proving something different does so.

#### **a. Doubts about Jamnia and evidence that John's theology is much earlier than late first century**

The first thing to say is that the evidence which some scholars see as showing John to come from a late-first century situation, after church and synagogue have split, does not clearly prove anything of the sort.

Scholars have suggested that John's negative portrayal of 'the Jews' and the references to them excluding Christians from the synagogue reflects the situation after the so-called Council of Jamnia. But it is very doubtful if the Council did have the significance that scholars have attributed to it. We are not sure what actually happened, and not at all sure that it marked a

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<sup>35</sup> To say that is not to say that every historical writer is creative in the way that scholars have supposed to be true of John: indeed many historians have made it their ambition to be scrupulous with the facts, to allow figures from the past to be heard in their context and not anachronistically to put words and ideas on to their mouths.

decisive split between church and synagogue. In the Anchor Bible Dictionary article on the Council the author Jack Lewis comments that the hypothesis should 'be relegated to the limbo of unestablished hypotheses. It should not be allowed to be considered a consensus established by mere repetition of assertion.'<sup>36</sup>

It is interesting that in one of the earliest writings of the NT, 1 Thessalonians, Paul can speak of 'the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out' (2:14-16). There Paul is referring to 'the Jews' driving Christians out, right back in the 40s AD. So John's portrayal of the Jews in his gospel is not necessarily post-Jamnia, not necessarily even post-the time of Jesus – after all relations between Jesus and the Jewish authorities were not entirely cordial; they had him crucified. Generally, John's portrayal of Jesus and his ministry makes excellent sense in the context of pre AD 70 Palestine, as we know it.

### *The Johannine thunderbolt in 'Q'*

As for the emphases that supposedly reflect John's post-Jamnia situation, all of them can be shown to go back much earlier in Christian history. One of the most interesting pieces of evidence is Matthew 11:25-27/Luke 10:21,22, where Jesus prays: 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you hid these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes. Yes, Father, because such was your good pleasure. All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.' These words of Jesus, being common to Matthew and Luke, are widely recognized by scholars as going back to early tradition (indeed to the 'Q' source, postulated by many scholars, and datable back to around AD 50). What is extraordinary about them is how Johannine they are: the language of 'Father' and 'Son', the idea of 'knowing' the Father and Son and the idea of revelation to Jesus' followers and not to others are all things that we have seen to be very important in John. So here are these 'Johannine' distinctives being attributed to Jesus decades before Jamnia. Admittedly the synoptics do not have a lot of such Johannine sayings (though there are other slightly less striking ones<sup>37</sup>), however, the

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<sup>36</sup> Anchor Bible III, 1992, 634-37.

<sup>37</sup> Mt. 13:11/Lk. 8:10 (*cf.* Mk. 4:11) has the idea of divine 'mysteries' being made known to the disciples and not to others. All three synoptics include the parable of the vineyard tenants where the vineyard owner 'sends' his 'son': we are reminded of John's emphasis on Jesus as the beloved Son who is sent by the Father (Mk. 12:1-12 and parallels). The synoptic accounts of the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus are also strikingly Johannine: thus Jesus is (a) 'the Son' in both baptism and transfiguration narratives, (b) in a special relationship of love with the Father in both, (c) the recipient of the Spirit in a special way in the baptism story, (d) one who reflects the glory of God in the transfiguration story. Whatever else may be said, this observation makes it clear that these Johannine emphases were important in early, well-attested synoptic traditions. (The importance of such themes at an early date may be confirmed by Paul's evidence in a passage like 2 Cor. 3 and 4,

one saying on its own shows that John's distinctives do not come out of John's distinctive theological imagination at the end of the first century.

*Some evidence from Paul*

That point is reinforced when we look at some of Paul's writings. In 1 Corinthians 1-4 Paul speaks about Christians as people who have received divine revelation, and some scholars think that he knows the 'Q' tradition of Matthew 11:25-27. More significantly, Philippians 2:5-11 is a famous passage where Paul speaks of Jesus having emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, going to the cross, and then being highly-exalted. We do not have John's 'descending/ascending' language here, but we have something very like it. Paul sees Jesus as pre-existent; and his 'super-exalt' word is related to the Greek word used in John, when he speaks of Jesus being 'lifted up' on the cross. Many scholars have claimed that Philippians 2:5-11 is a hymn that existed before Paul wrote Philippians and which he took over in his letter; in which case we find that 'Johannine' christology was anticipated not just by Paul, but possibly even earlier in the hymns of the early church. People have also seen Colossians 1:15-20 as an early hymn, and it is even more 'Johannine': its description of the pre-existent Jesus as the one through whom God created the world is strikingly similar to the prologue of John's gospel.<sup>38</sup>

One particular piece of evidence deriving from Paul and from Mark's gospel has to do with the word 'Abba' (Gal 4:6, Rom 8:15, Mark 14:36). The use of this Aramaic term three times in the Greek New Testament points strongly to the conclusion (a) that it goes back to Jesus (note in Gal 4:6 how Paul speaks of 'the Spirit of his Son ... crying Abba, Father'), and (b) that it was distinctive of Jesus; it was not usual for Jews to use this family word when addressing God. Jesus' use of the word does not prove that he had what we might call a Johannine Christology, but it does show that the Johannine emphasis on Jesus as Son of God is firmly rooted in the teaching of Jesus.<sup>39</sup>

It turns out that the 'Johannine' theological emphases are not so distinctive, and that they seem to have featured in the very earliest traditions of the Christian church.<sup>40</sup>

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where he speaks of the glory of Christ who is the image of God, and of the glory of God in the face of Christ, 4:4, 6.)

<sup>38</sup> People have questioned whether Colossians was actually written by Paul himself. I think it was. But the point about 'Johannine' ideas being anticipated in Paul remains in any case, for example in a verse like 1 Cor. 8:6, which speaks of 'one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we live', or 2 Cor. 4:4, where Paul speaks of Christ as the 'image of God'.

<sup>39</sup> Casey in his book fails to notice the importance of this point.

<sup>40</sup> Other Johannine sounding texts in Paul include Gal. 4:4 'God sent his Son ...' and Rom. 1:3, 4, where again Jesus is 'his Son'. In both cases scholars have speculated that Paul may be echoing credal material that antedates the letters concerned. If they are right, this just reinforces the impression that Johannine Christology is not a late evolution in Christian thinking, but something

## *Loving one another*

The same is true of his ethical teaching about love. John suggests that the command 'love one another as I have loved you' was something particularly important for Jesus: it was his 'new commandment' (13:34, 15:12). At first sight this looks quite different from the synoptics, where we find a broader emphasis on loving one's neighbour and even one's enemy. The suspicion is that John has narrowed the focus because of his church context. However, a closer look shows not only that this Johannine emphasis has a parallel in the synoptics (*e.g.* in Mk. 9:33-50 and 10:41-45, with its important stress on service within the Christian fellowship), but also that it is a strong emphasis in Paul's letters, for example in 1 Thes. 4:9 'You are all taught of God to love one another' (also Rom. 12:10). Once again a feature of John that could point to a post-Jamnia setting is found to be part of the teaching of the church from a very early date. In Paul we find a dual emphasis on loving fellow-Christians and loving others as well (Gal. 6:10, 1 Thes. 5:15); in John it must be admitted that there is more explicit emphasis on the first, but he too can speak of Jesus' mission in terms of God loving the world and of Christians being called to share in that mission (3:16, 20:21).

One particularly interesting text in this connection is Gal. 6:2, where Paul tells the Galatians to 'bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.' Scholars have puzzled over why Paul speaks of the 'law' of Christ in a letter where he mainly stresses freedom from the law. But one real possibility is that Paul knows the tradition of Jesus' new commandment which we find in John – bearing 'one another's' burdens is after all much the same as loving 'one another'. Scholars have not often seen this possible connection, probably because they assume distinctive 'Johannine' traditions of Jesus to be late and not historical; but we have seen a significant amount of evidence that shows that John's distinctives go back early into Christian history.

It is entirely possible that Paul knew what we call 'Johannine' traditions of Jesus in the 50s and the 60s AD– not just the new command, but perhaps also, as we saw, Jesus' teaching about 'knowing the Father and the Son' (as reflected in Mt. 11:27). Did he also know some of the teaching about the Holy Spirit that we find in John? Certainly both Paul in 1 Corinthians and Jesus in John's gospel emphasize divine revelation to Christians and the work of the Holy Spirit: it is entirely possible that Paul learned his emphasis on the Spirit, as other theological emphases, from teaching of Jesus (directly or indirectly).<sup>41</sup> It is possible that Paul's distinctive teaching about being 'in

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that goes right back in the history of the Christian church.

<sup>41</sup> Even if he didn't, his evidence makes it quite clear that the Johannine emphasis on the Spirit would be at home in a context quite different from the Jamnian context. On Paul's extensive knowledge and use of the stories and sayings of Jesus see my *Paul Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

Christ' derived from Jesus' sayings about the vine and the branches, as found in John 15: both John and Paul speak of the mutual indwelling of Christ and the believer. We could go on.

Even if some of the ideas we have discussed are speculative, what is not debatable is that many of the distinctive features of John's gospel that are often seen to be peculiar to him and that are regarded as evidence of his advanced theological thinking are actually anticipated in some of the earliest parts of the New Testament. There is even some evidence that such 'Johannine' teaching was regarded as coming from Jesus himself, long before John is thought to have compiled his gospel. We are thus moving towards the opinion that John's distinctive emphases are not to be explained in terms of his theological inventiveness, but in terms of his particular selection of early stories and sayings of Jesus. (We will come back to the question of why he has selected what he has later.)

### **b. Evidence of John having historical traditions**

This view is reinforced by evidence which suggests that John did have good historical traditions at his disposal which are not found in the synoptic gospels. This has been argued most powerfully in recent years by John Robinson, who was no theological conservative, but who still championed the view that John's gospel has a very good claim to be taken as historical.<sup>42</sup>

The evidence includes:

(1) names and places that are archaeologically or historically confirmed. For example, there is the story found in John 5 (but not in the synoptics) of the lame man healed at the pool of Bethesda. John describes the pool as having 'five porticoes'. Today this pool is a tourist site in Jerusalem, having been excavated in the 1930s. The archaeologists found that it was (a) a pool associated with a healing shrine, which makes good sense of John's reference to people waiting by the pool for the waters to be moved, so that they could be healed; (b) that it had a larger and smaller basin, which makes good sense of the five porticoes, if there was a portico round the sides of the whole pool complex and one between the two basins. There is also a probable reference to the double pool in the Dead Sea Scrolls. If John is writing a theological meditation on Jesus, he is doing so with the aid of accurate topographical information about Jerusalem.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> It may be added that John's strong statement about the 'word becoming flesh' in 1:14 suggests that John had a major theological interest in Jesus as a real historical figure. Robinson's major work is *The Priority of John* (London: SCM, 1985). Robinson summarizes his thesis thus: 'I shall be contending that there is no either-or between recognizing John as the *omega* of the NT witness, the end-term, or an end-term, of its theological reflection, and also as its *alpha*, standing as close as any to the source from which it sprang. His theology does not, I believe, take us further from the history but leads us more deeply into it.' (p. 33)

<sup>43</sup> There are other topographical details which suggest good information, as the reference to Jacob's

(2) More broadly there are all sorts of things in the gospel that are historically plausible, given what we know of first century Palestine. Thus John's comment in John 6:15 on the crowd wanting to make Jesus king after the feeding of the 5000 makes historical sense in the political context of occupied Palestine. John's description of the Jewish authorities being alarmed that Jesus' popularity might lead to a Roman intervention against the country in 11:48 is entirely plausible.<sup>44</sup>

Then there is John's description of Jesus and his disciples going up regularly to the different feasts in Jerusalem. We saw that some of his description of Jesus at the feasts fits in with what we know of the temple rituals: thus John has Jesus offering people 'living water' at the feast of tabernacles in ch. 7, and it may be significant that the festival involved a daily water-pouring ceremony (probably connected to Zc. 14:18): a procession would go down to the pool of Siloam below the temple, fill a golden jar with water, and then return to the altar in the temple, where the water was poured out at the side of the altar. Even if that particular suggestion is speculative, the Johannine picture of Jesus going up to various feasts in Jerusalem is one that arguably makes better historical sense than the synoptic picture, where Jesus is only described as making the one visit to the holy city at the end of his ministry.

(3) That leads us on to say that things recorded in John help make sense of things in the synoptics. Thus John's description of Jesus making a number of visits to Jerusalem helps make sense of the synoptic story of Jesus sending his disciples to find a particular donkey in a particular place, and then to follow a particular man to his upper room (Mk. 11:2, 14:13). John's reference to the political fervour of the crowd after the feeding of the 5000 helps explain why Jesus in the synoptics sends the disciples away across the lake, leaving him behind to deal with the over-excited crowd (Mk. 6:45).

(4) There are also things in John that are historically plausible, because of their potentially embarrassing nature to the early Christians. Thus the failure of the synoptics to mention the crowd's attempt to make Jesus king may well have been because of their anxiety lest people should see Jesus and his movement as revolutionary trouble-makers (*e.g.* Acts 24:5).

Perhaps as interesting as any evidence is John 3:22-4:2, where various of the points we have been making come together. In this passage Jesus is portrayed as baptizing in Judea, alongside John the Baptist as it appears and before John's arrest. There is no hint of this baptizing ministry of Jesus in the synoptic gospels: they describe Jesus being baptized by John, and then

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well in Sychar in 4:5.

<sup>44</sup> Not only is this historically plausible, but, as we observed, the idea of the high priest speaking prophetically about the value of Jesus' death is very Jewish.

starting to minister in Galilee after John's arrest. The passage in John looks strongly like independent information that John had about Jesus, and historically very plausible information:

- In the first place because of the snippets of topographical information it contains: thus John speaks of the baptist baptizing 'in Aenon, near Salim, because there was much water'.
- In the second place, John's story of Jesus baptizing alongside the Baptist seems unlikely to have been invented by the evangelist, since it makes Jesus appear a little bit like John, even perhaps a disciple of John. It is quite clear that the writer of John's gospel wanted to avoid any such impression, since he goes out of his way to have the Baptist affirming Jesus' superiority; but the way he does so lends weight to the suggestion that the early church had some bother with followers of John the Baptist who claimed that he, the baptizer who came first, was greater than Jesus, the baptized who came second; the Christians therefore insisted on the superiority of Jesus.<sup>45</sup> The reason that the synoptics do not describe Jesus' ministering in Judea with John and like John may have been precisely because it was a potentially embarrassing period of Jesus' ministry to them. For the same reason John is unlikely to have invented it.
- In any case, and thirdly, the Johannine narrative makes good sense in the synoptic context: it fills in a gap in the synoptic record – between Jesus' baptism in Judea and the start of his ministry in Galilee – and it also helps explain the otherwise unexplained fact that in the synoptics Christian baptism appears to start after Easter at the risen Christ's command (for no very obvious reason); John's account suggests that the church's baptizing was not something new for them, but the continuation of something that Jesus himself had started in his ministry.

Even things that at first sight seem contradictory between John and the synoptics turn out in some cases to be complementary. Thus in the synoptics the disciples apparently do not confess Jesus as the Messiah until the middle of Jesus' ministry, when Jesus asks them what their opinion of him is and Peter says: 'You are the Messiah'. In John's gospel on the other hand people like Andrew and Nathanael are talking about Jesus as the Messiah and king of Israel from the very first chapter onwards. At first sight this looks like an obvious case of John having written without regard for the historical sequence of events: he wants to get the truth of Jesus clearly proclaimed in his ch. 1. However, although that might be the explanation, the question has to be asked: is it in fact historically plausible to view Peter's confession at

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<sup>45</sup> See further below. Casey's opposite argument – that the synoptists would have been glad to use the story had they known it to support the Christian practice of baptism – fails to see how potentially and actually embarrassing the Baptist-Jesus link was to the early Christians.

Caesarea Philippi, as it is described in the synoptics, as the first recognition by Jesus' disciples of his Messiahship? Had the idea not dawned before then?<sup>46</sup> This seems most unlikely historically, and it is much more likely that from a very early stage people followed Jesus hoping that he might be the one they were looking for. That is what John suggests. If anything, we might argue that the synoptic account seems more theologically stylized in this respect and in having only one journey to Jerusalem. However, there is no need to choose between them: it is entirely possible that Caesarea Philippi was a reaffirmation of faith from Peter, in face of much doubt and controversy, not the first break-through into an appreciation of Jesus' messiahship. John has Peter make precisely such a reaffirmation in 6:69.<sup>47</sup>

The reasonable conclusion on the basis of such evidence is that John's gospel is a historically well-informed account of Jesus' ministry, John having good sources of information other than (or in addition to) the synoptics.

### **c. The disciple whom Jesus loved**

The gospel itself makes precisely that claim, since it claims to be written by an eyewitness, or at least to be based on eyewitness testimony. This is probably implied in 1:14, where the author says: 'We have seen his glory', but is unambiguous in 19:35, where he says in connection with the death of Jesus: 'he who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true and he knows that he tells the truth ...'. The same sort of claim is found in 21:24, where there is reference to the 'disciple whom Jesus loved', of whom it is said 'this is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and we know that his witness is true.'

It is clear that the writer of these verses is interested in eyewitness-truth, not just in theological truth. More than that, it is clear that the claim is being made that the 'disciple whom Jesus loved', one of Jesus' immediate followers, is in some sense the author of the gospel.

The 'disciple whom Jesus loved' is referred to in several texts towards the end of the gospel (13:23, 19:26, 21:7, 21:20), and may also be referred to without being named in 1:35-39, 18:15, 19:35, 20:2-10). Scholars have argued to and fro about the identity of this beloved disciple, with candidates for the post including John the son of Zebedee (the traditional identification), Lazarus whom Jesus raised (because of 11:3), John Mark (Acts 13:5), or an otherwise unknown disciple called John. Some scholars have argued that he is not an actual historical individual, but is an 'ideal' figure – a model disciple

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<sup>46</sup> According to Luke people had talked about John the Baptist as possibly Messiah (3:15).

<sup>47</sup> People often contrast the way Jesus seems to be secretive about his messiahship and identity in the synoptics, especially Mark, with the openness of John. There is a difference of emphasis, but John is quite clear that there was a secretive side to Jesus and his teaching (e.g. 7:10, 16:25, 29), and in 10:24 he is urged to come out in the open about his messiahship.

(who, for example, is with Jesus at the cross); this is thought, among other things, to explain why he is called 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', which otherwise sounds a rather odd description to give to one of Jesus' followers.

Despite the ingenious arguments of scholars, the traditional identification remains easily the most plausible. There are a whole range of arguments for this: first, the earliest evidence that we have is that the gospel was written by the apostle and son of Zebedee. It comes from the second century bishop of Lyons in France, Irenaeus, who commented 'Finally John, the disciple of the Lord, who had also lain on his breast, himself published the gospel, while he was residing at Ephesus'; Irenaeus is said by the historian Eusebius to have got this information from Polycarp of Smyrna, who was actually acquainted with the apostles (*Ecclesiastical History* 5, 8, 4). The tradition thus appears to go right back. And it does not appear to have been seriously questioned, except by a few groups who did not like some of the teaching in the gospel.

Second, if John the apostle is the disciple whom Jesus loved, this helps to explain why John and his brother James are not otherwise named in the gospel, except for one reference in 21:2 to 'the sons of Zebedee'. The absence of John in the narrative is otherwise very strange, since he, with his brother and with Peter, are members of the privileged inner three disciples of Jesus in the synoptics: they witness momentous events like the transfiguration and the sufferings of Jesus in Gethsemane. John appears, to judge from the book of Acts and also from Paul's letter to the Galatians, to have continued to be one of the most prominent leaders in the earliest Christian church – one of the pillars (Gal. 2:9). Given the importance of John in the synoptics and the earliest church, it is very odd indeed if the fourth gospel fails to mention him at all: we might almost suspect a vendetta! If, however, he is the beloved disciple, then he is mentioned, albeit with a reticence that makes sense if he is the author.

Third, and following on from the previous point, the beloved disciple is mentioned in association with Peter, thus 13:23 and especially in chs. 20 and 21. In these last chapters scholars have detected a sense of some friendly rivalry between Peter and the beloved (or other) disciple, as the two of them run to the tomb and then as Jesus discusses their respective deaths. No one known to us among Jesus' disciples fits into the role of 'rival' to Peter so obviously as John the apostle, and it makes good sense to suppose that the gospel comes to us from church circles where John was a specially honoured figure. There may be a grain of truth in the view that the disciple whom Jesus loved is an 'ideal' figure, in the sense that his disciples saw him as exemplary in various respects; but he was an entirely real person to them, not a literary construct. As for the expression 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', this may have been an expression used by John's followers to

describe the position that John had in the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. Not that it would necessarily have been immodest for John himself to have paid tribute to his experience of Jesus by describing himself as the recipient of Jesus' love.

There is, I suggest, a very strong case for thinking that the gospel claims to derive from John son of Zebedee, apostle of Jesus. Some scholars may find it difficult to accept the claim, but some of their difficulties are not really very difficult: we have seen that the old scholarly view that John is highly Hellenistic rather than Palestinian is straightforwardly mistaken (not that John son of Zebedee will have been isolated from the Greek world of thought, especially if he was in Ephesus when he wrote his gospel, as tradition has it). As for the opinion that John the fisherman could not have written as sophisticated a document as John's gospel, that is questionable in every respect:

- in the first place, the style of John's gospel is not particularly sophisticated Greek;
- in the second place, it is a curious prejudice that says that ancient fishermen (from families wealthy enough to own fishing boats and have servants, Mark 1:20) will necessarily have been uneducated;
- in the third place, it underestimates how much Jesus' disciples will have learned from Jesus himself and through their own reflections as they later taught about him.

As for the view that John's theology and christology represents a late stage in the evolution of early Christian doctrine, we have seen that in fact John's ideas are attested in early strands of the New Testament; in any case it is unwise to suppose that doctrine does or did evolve in a neat way from less developed to more developed thinking. Paul after all is our earliest New Testament writer, but his theology is usually seen as more developed and sophisticated than that of most of the rest of the New Testament.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> It has been argued that John son of Zebedee could hardly have failed to mention events that he was involved in, like the transfiguration; but it is equally unlikely, perhaps even more so, that anyone else would have omitted that very 'Johannine' story of Jesus. The question as to why the author of the gospel, whether John son of Zebedee or not, omitted both the stories of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration cannot be answered with any certainty. The one thing that may confidently be said is that he is extremely unlikely to have been ignorant of them: indeed he demonstrates his knowledge of the baptism tradition in 1:32-34 and probably alludes to the transfiguration in 1:14. Beyond that it is only possible to make speculative suggestions: thus (1) he may quite deliberately have chosen not to re-tell well known traditions (with some exceptions like the feeding of the 5000, which leads into his unique bread of life discourse). Or (2) he may have felt that the grand themes of Jesus' glory and sonship were better explained to his readers through the signs and narrative he has presented in his gospel than through the well-known baptism and transfiguration stories. Not that he or his readers are likely to have had twentieth century hang-ups about things like heavenly voices (any more than about demonic exorcisms which he also fails to mention). However, it is conceivable that stories such as the baptism were being

If John's gospel derives from John, even if it was written up by his followers,<sup>49</sup> then its importance historically cannot be overestimated.

#### d. The question of differences once again

But, although the case for the apostolic origin and historical value of John's gospel is much, much stronger than is often supposed, the differences between John's gospel and the synoptics still remain, and still need explanation. Not that the differences are as massive as is sometimes thought: we have noted all sorts of points of continuity, with something like Matthew 11:25-27 being such a strikingly Johannine passage in the synoptic heartlands. But what are we to make of the real differences that there are?

A starting-point is to say that different witnesses to the same event do typically pick on very different things to describe and highlight.<sup>50</sup> So for John to tell us different stories of Jesus from the synoptics is not in itself surprising. The synoptics are usually thought to be interdependent in some ways (with Mark being seen as a source of Matthew and Luke). It could be that, whereas they are interdependent, John is independent of them, going his own way and choosing his own stories. On the other hand, it is possible that John did know the synoptics and that he quite deliberately chose different events and stories so as not to duplicate the synoptics too much: he wanted to supplement them.

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used in ways that John was unhappy about. For example, the baptism story may have been used to show the superiority of John the Baptist to Jesus (and/or the equality of Jesus with other baptized people); so John chose to refer to it indirectly through the testimony of the Baptist in a way that made clear Jesus' superiority. It is also conceivable that John (like Paul in his letters to the Corinthians and Mark in his gospel) was aware of Christians who made a lot of Jesus as a divine figure, whose glory was revealed in signs and wonders (including the transfiguration), but who had little place in their theology for the ignominious cross (*cf.* 1 Jn. 5:6). John portrays the cross as the moment of supreme glorification (as well also as the decisive exorcism of Satan).

<sup>49</sup> Scholars have proposed that the gospel went through multiple editings by different people, and have spoken of the gospel emanating from a Johannine 'school' that perhaps had the apostle as its founder (so, for example, Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School* [Missoula:Scholars, 1975]). I find most of such theories over-speculative and largely unnecessary, though I do not at all rule out that the gospel may have been written down (or written up!) by someone other than the apostle, as could be inferred from 21:24.

Modern scholars defending the apostolic authorship of the gospel include John Robinson in *The Priority of John* (London:SCM, 1985) and Craig Blomberg in his *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Leicester:Apollos, 2001). The German scholar Martin Hengel agrees that the author of the gospel was a first-generation follower of Jesus, but, slightly curiously, does not identify him with John son of Zebedee; see his *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM/Philadelphia:Trinity, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> Scholars often assume that differences between John and the Synoptics are because of John's theological bias and his lack of interest in history. But, although John has certainly selected material for his gospel to make particular theological points, it does not follow that he felt free to invent or significantly modify history. John claims to be interested in eyewitness history. He also claims, very credibly, to have independent information for some of his stories (19:35); so we might expect his account to differ from that in the synoptic gospels. In considering John's passion narrative M. Casey makes much too much of supposed historical problems or contradictions with the synoptics.

However, it is not satisfactory simply to explain that John 'happened' to include different stories in his gospel, nor to suggest that he just chose his material because it did not overlap too much with the synoptics. There is something much more systematic and deliberate going on.

What is going on is made clear in John 20:31, where, as we saw, John very deliberately explains his agenda: namely that he is writing to clarify the question of Jesus' identity. Whereas the synoptics give a general picture of Jesus, John homes in on the question of who Jesus is, doing everything he can to show that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God in whom is life. John selects his material and presents his material, including the sayings of Jesus, in order to make that point: chapter after chapter is saying essentially the same thing.

His reason for such a sharply focused picture could be because he believed that earlier accounts (including perhaps the synoptics) were insufficiently clear on the matter. But almost certainly the driving force for his writing in this way was the situation that he faced. He was in a situation where there was controversy about the person of Jesus, and he wanted to sort people out.

### **Who did he have in mind?**

#### *1. Jews from the synagogue*

One of the grains of truth in the Jamnia hypothesis is probably that John had Jews in mind, among others, when he wrote. The Christian church, having arisen out of Judaism, was in conflict with the Jewish synagogue throughout much of the first century: the Christians claimed to be the true successors of Israel, and the church seemed to the synagogue to be poaching its members. The tension is understandable, and John was very likely writing in that sort of context – vigorously asserting Jesus' messiahship, which the Jews equally forcefully denied, and vigorously insisting on Jesus as the only true revelation of God, in face of Jewish claims for other revealer-figures such as Moses and Enoch.

#### *2. Followers of John the Baptist*

But John's focus on Jesus' identity was not simply in response to the synagogue. It seems likely that he was also responding to followers of John the Baptist, who were claiming that John was greater than Jesus. This is suggested by the way the author of the gospel goes out of his way to have John the Baptist testify to Jesus' greatness, when people asked him. Thus in 3:30, when people ask him about the competition that Jesus seems to represent, the Baptist says: 'He must increase, but I must decrease'. The most striking verse in this connection is in 1:20, where John has been asked who he was, and 'he confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, "I am not

the Christ".<sup>51</sup> Notable here are the terms of John's denial – he denies that he (rather than Jesus, we infer) is the Christ – and also the way the denial is underlined and emphasized by the evangelist. In today's computer-speak we would say that the evangelist underlines the denial of John and puts it into bold type – thus 'he confessed, he did not deny, he confessed'. The reason he writes in these terms is very probably because people were claiming that John the baptizer was greater than Jesus the baptized. They were arguing that John had the greater claim to being the Messiah: they recalled that Jesus worked alongside John baptizing in Judea, and maintained that he was John's disciple. We suggested earlier that the synoptists may have been sufficiently embarrassed by this period in Jesus' ministry simply to jump over it; but John is bolder, recording the parallel ministry, in the process making it very clear that Jesus was recognized by John as the far greater one.

To some modern Christian readers it may come as a surprise that there were any followers of John the Baptist who failed to see Jesus as the Messiah, perhaps because we have failed to recognize how considerable a figure John was in his own right; but we know that there were people who preferred John to Jesus in the third century AD, and it is probable that these people had their predecessors in the NT period themselves. It is in the face of such 'Baptist' teaching that the writer of John's gospel affirms so strongly Jesus' greatness and superiority. Jesus, not John, is the way, the truth, etc.

### *3. Ex-members of John's church: the evidence of 1 John*

But there is still more evidence of controversy over the identity of Jesus which John was probably addressing, and this time within the Christian church itself. This is in the first letter of John. Scholars are not 100% persuaded that the letters were written by the same person as the gospel, but the style of the letters and the gospel is very similar, and at least they must have come from the same sort of context and circle. What is interesting about the first letter of John is that it shows that within John's church there had been a serious split, focusing on the question of Jesus' identity. Thus 2:18 speaks of 'antichrists' who 'went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us, but they went out ...': What distinguished these 'antichrists' from John and his church? The very expression 'antichrist' is a clue, and the issue is clarified in 4:1-3: 'Many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God.' The divisive issue was Christology. It is not possible to be sure exactly what 'the antichrists' were saying,<sup>51</sup> but somehow they were putting Jesus down, claiming prophetic inspiration by the Spirit for their views.

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<sup>51</sup>Just conceivably they could have been preferring John the Baptist to Jesus, or separating 'the heavenly Christ' from the human Jesus, or seeing Jesus as just the prototype of a Spirit-endowed

It is easy to see how John could be responding to such ideas in the gospel: he devotes his energy to explaining the story of Jesus in christological terms. He emphasizes Jesus' divinity more than his humanity, because others were putting Jesus down. He affirms that Jesus is the source of eternal life, and no one else.<sup>52</sup>

There is an interesting parallel in Paul's letter to the Colossians, where Paul deals with a philosophy that was infiltrating the church and that was 'not according to Christ' (2:8-12). Again people were somehow putting Christ down, perhaps exalting other spiritual powers. Paul's response in Colossians is to emphasize the supremacy of Christ, as the image of God, the first-born of creation and the one in whom the fullness of deity dwelt (Col. 1:15-20); we are reminded of John 1. Paul emphasizes Christ's sufficiency as the way to life and salvation (*e.g.* 3:3), reminding us again of John. Paul speaks of the cross as a victory over spiritual powers (2:15), again rather like John with his distinctive view of the cross as glorification and victory. In face of christological heresy (in the Ephesus area) Paul writes his letter with a particular focus; in face of christological heresy (in the same area, according to early tradition!), John writes a gospel with a similar focus.

John's 'realised eschatology' may also make sense in this context. John emphasizes that life is in Christ now, not because he has gone cold on future eschatology, but because he wants to affirm the sufficiency of Jesus in face of all competing claims. Similarly Paul in Colossians 3:3 can speak of the Colossians having died with Christ and of Christ 'who is your life'.

To judge from 1 John the 'antichrists' referred to there claimed to have the anointing of the Spirit (*e.g.* 4:1-3) , and so one of the questions that the author of the letter has to address is how to distinguish the Holy Spirit from false spirits. He reminds his readers of what they have been taught from the beginning (1:1ff.). It may be no accident that John's gospel too has a lot of discussion of the Spirit teaching the disciples, and that the gospel makes crystal clear the intimate connection of the Spirit with Jesus. Does John want to counter people who are claiming the Spirit, but putting Jesus down?

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Christian. See note 40 above.

<sup>52</sup> This suggestion works best if John's gospel is thought to have been written at about the same time as the epistle, or at least after the split described in 1 Jn. had taken place. Many good scholars argue, however, that the gospel preceded the epistle. It is argued, among other things, that the epistle addresses the 'docetic' tendencies of people who were denying the fleshly reality of Jesus: the gospel, however, does not seem to be especially worried by such 'docetism' and might indeed be seen as fuel for that view rather than as a response to it, therefore as preceding not following the epistle. Three brief things may be said to this point: (1) it is not certain that 1 John is addressing a simple case of people denying the fleshly reality of Jesus; they may have been putting Jesus down in other ways; (2) the gospel does contain things that scholars have identified as anti-docetic, not least 1:14; (3) even if 1 Jn. was written a significant number of years after the gospel, it may well be that the divisions described in the epistle were beginning to surface much earlier.

I John may help us in other ways, throwing light, for example, on the gospel's emphasis on 'loving one another' as a mark of true discipleship. If John's church had recently been split, or was facing imminent division, then John might very well have wanted to major very loudly on Jesus' call to love one another. Christians loving or not loving one another was the burning issue, rather than, for example, loving one's enemy. 'Abiding' or 'remaining' in the vine was very important indeed in that context: it was more immediately pressing even than the missionary challenge, though that is not forgotten in John.

If the first letter of John helps clarify the context of the gospel and hence its distinctiveness, it may also confirm that the writer of the gospel is being deliberately selective in how he writes, rather than giving us the whole story. We have seen how the gospel has more emphasis on the cross as victory than on atonement (though it is not by any means absent); 1 John interestingly does contain traditional atonement language such as we associate with Paul – speaking of Christ's blood cleansing us from all sin (1:7) and of Jesus as the 'propitiation for our sins' (2:2). We have seen too how the gospel is fairly muted in what it has to say about the second coming; the first letter, however, speaks of the antichrists who have come as evidence that it is 'the last hour' (2:18). This is very synoptic-sounding and Pauline-sounding language. The occurrence of such phrases in the letter has led some scholars to doubt whether it is written by the same author as the gospel; but at the very least they show that these synoptic/Pauline emphases were alive and well in Johannine circles. More than that, they probably confirm what we have suspected – namely that the gospel's theology is not as 'eccentric' as some scholars suppose. It is just that the evangelist has focused, almost ruthlessly, on his task in hand in the gospel; he has not tried to give us a rounded picture of Jesus or his message.

#### **e. John's literary contribution**

All that we have said so far should not be taken to suggest that John's gospel is a word-for-word literally historical account of Jesus. It seems likely that John may often be putting the story of Jesus into his own words, and/or into words that will make good sense to his readers. This is suggested by the distinctive style and vocabulary of Jesus' teaching in John when this is compared with the synoptics, and also by the similarity of the style and vocabulary when Jesus speaks in John and where John is writing editorially. It has often been observed how in a passage like John ch. 3 it is not at all clear where Jesus' words end and John's comments begin: some modern versions put the quotation marks at the end of v. 15 to mark the end of Jesus' words and others take it that the whole passage up to v. 22 should be seen as words of Jesus.

Further evidence pointing in this direction may be John's preference for 'eternal life' rather than 'kingdom of God'. John, like Paul, finds kingdom language to be rather inaccessible to his Greek-speaking readers, and perhaps also a potential embarrassment, since 'kingdom' could be understood politically.<sup>53</sup> 'Eternal life' is more intelligible and conveys better John's conviction that Jesus' 'kingdom is not of this world' (18:36). In the case of 'eternal life' John has not substituted his own phrase for Jesus' actual words, since Jesus spoke of 'eternal life' according to the synoptics. What he may have done in this case is to substitute one phrase of Jesus for another, for the reasons we have suggested.

This still means that John does not always give us the actual words (*ipsissima verba*) of Jesus. But to an extent that is true of all the gospel writers. Apart from anything else it is likely that Jesus spoke mostly in Aramaic; what we have then in the gospels is a translation. But it is possible to go further than this: it is well-known that translations (*e.g.* of the Bible) can be of different sorts: some are very literal, others are much freer in the actual wording, but may convey the original sense better. The gospels arguably translate literally sometimes and much more paraphrastically at other times: John is perhaps more often in the free translation rather than the literal translation camp.

Not that translation is always the best model to explain what is going on: the modern newspaper reporter who reports on a famous person's speech may sometimes quote the actual words of the speaker (in translation if necessary), but will often summarize or paraphrase what was said in ways that will make sense to the intended reader. Such is inevitably the case in the gospels: the writers offer us extracts and summaries, putting things into their own words and making clear the meaning of what was said. Once again, it may be that John is more the interpreter and less the exact chronicler than the synoptics, even if it is only a matter of degree. To say that is not an oblique way of admitting that John is not historical after all; not at all. It is a matter of considering how John writes history, not a matter of questioning whether John writes history.

But let us be more specific: did Jesus say 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me'? The answer on the view we have been describing would be: yes, he did, but not necessarily in those exact words (and in any case not in Greek!). Of course, he could have said

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<sup>53</sup> Whether John felt similarly that the stories of Jesus' exorcisms (which are prominent in the synoptics) would not be properly understood by his Greek readers is not so sure. M. Casey's view that John was embarrassed by the Jews' accusation that Jesus cast out demons by the devil's power seems unlikely, not least because John used the category of exorcism to describe the cross (12:31). But still he may have felt that other 'signs' of Jesus would communicate his message about Jesus better than the exorcism stories, or that he simply wished to focus on Jesus' victorious conflict with the devil on the cross.

those exact words; he could have said all the great 'I am' sayings exactly as they are recorded in John (only in Aramaic). But it may be that the quotation marks which modern editors have inserted into the text are misleading, and that it is John who has formulated the wording as we have it.

But John is not just drawing on his own theological convictions when he says that Jesus said 'I am the way ...' etc. The synoptics, including Mark, suggest that Jesus did say 'I am' on significant occasions, and perhaps with significant meaning: thus, when Jesus walks on the water and says 'I am' to the terrified disciples, it may just mean 'It's me', but it may be that Mark saw a deeper meaning in the words (Mark 6:50). The same may be true, when Jesus says 'I am' at his trial in response to questions about his identity (14:62).<sup>54</sup> The synoptics also suggest that Jesus spoke of 'the way' or the 'path' leading to 'life', referring to his own teaching and to discipleship (Matt 7:14). It is not a million mile jump to get from such synoptic texts to John's 'I am' saying.

The same sort of thing may be said about others of Jesus' 'I am' sayings. We do not find Jesus speaking of himself as the good shepherd in the synoptics, but in his famous parable he does compare his own ministry to that of a deeply caring shepherd who cares for the one sheep that was lost (Lk. 15:3-7) Jesus does not say 'I am the door', but he does speak of the narrow gate/door that leads to life (Mt. 7:13, Lk. 13:24). He does not say 'I am the bread of life', but he does take bread and break it, and say 'This is my body'. He does not say 'I am the true vine', but he does speak of vines and vineyards and compare 'the fruit of the vine' to his own blood.

On the basis of this evidence the conclusion could be that the synoptics and John are so close that there is no reason to deny that Jesus said exactly what John says he said. But the conclusion could also be that John has paraphrased Jesus' words in order to make their meaning crystal clear, not least in the light of all the controversy that he was writing to combat: he wanted to bring out the christological significance of what Jesus had said about the narrow way, because he wanted to refute those who were putting Jesus down.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Matthew and Luke have 'You say that I am' at this point (Mt. 26:64, Lk. 22:70, cf. 21:8). We know that John was familiar with the 'I am' of the walking on the water story from his 6:20.

<sup>55</sup> What I have said leaves plenty of questions unanswered, including in my own mind! But the case for seeing John as firmly anchored in the history of Jesus seems to me a good one.

## CHAPTER 5

### Using John's gospel today

It is, fortunately, not necessary to answer every historical and literary question about John's gospel before one can appreciate the immense richness and value of the gospel.

#### a. The relevance of John

John was writing for a very specific context, quite different from our own. But at point after point it is possible to see how John has much to say to us.

To take just one example: his idea of 'eternal life' as living in a community of love with God and with each other is a beautiful and exciting concept,<sup>56</sup> immensely relevant in our world where there is so much individualism and loneliness. There is a great challenge here to the church to be a fellowship exhibiting the unity and love that Jesus came to bring. John wrote as he did partly because he was faced with a painful schism in his church: we live in a church where fragmentation and denominationalism have been institutionalized for centuries, so much so that we come to take Christian disunity for granted. John makes it clear that Christian unity is not just a desirable aim for the church to work towards, nor just an invisible reality that has little effect on how we relate to each other, but that it is (a) an aspect of the eternal life which Jesus came to bring, *i.e.* something of fundamental importance. And (b) that it is not just a notional concept or an invisible reality, which makes few practical demands: no, it is something practical – we are to wash each others' feet – and schism is a sinful contradiction of it.

It is possible to see in such ways how relevant John's portrait of Jesus is to our needs and situations. Two qualifications or clarifications of that statement are, however, in order.

First, although John's gospel sometimes does seem to speak directly to our needs and situation, it was written in a very different context from ours, and so the relevance is not always immediate or direct. For example, many of the implicit or explicit allusions to Jewish life and thought can easily be lost on modern readers. However, John is a model to us of someone who believed the Jesus of history to be relevant to a later situation (*i.e.* that of his readers), and who sought to 'translate' and interpret the story of Jesus to

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<sup>56</sup> This Johannine emphasis has parallels in the synoptics. Thus in Lk. 10:25-27 Jesus is asked about eternal life and responds by telling his questioner to love God and to love his neighbour. Jesus also arguably demonstrates his understanding of eternal life as fellowship, by his notorious eating with sinners, and by the way he called his followers 'my brother and sister and mother' (Mk. 3:35).

answer questions that he and his readers were facing. So we will need to translate the message of Jesus for our day and our questions.

Second, what we have said about John means that the gospel is not a complete statement of Christian truth. It was not intended by John to be such, and it should not be used as such. We have seen how selective John is, and to rely only on John would risk our ending up with a distorted view of Christianity. Arguably this happened to the second century gnostics who used or misused John, and it could happen with some modern Christians who misread John as presenting a very individualistic, spiritualized brand of Christianity. John may well have written in the light of the synoptic tradition, in one sense to supplement that tradition.<sup>57</sup> Certainly John needs to be read by Christians today together with the other gospels, since we believe that it is no accident that God has given us four gospels. John, for example, has very little to say about a subject like the second coming and very little to say about the social demands of Jesus. In our modern world as we await the millennium Jesus' teaching about the future may be of particular importance to us; in our affluent world his teaching about not laying up treasures on earth is especially relevant.

#### **b. Commending Jesus and faith in him**

But it would be unfortunate to end by commenting on what John does not say; instead we will end by reflecting on what was John's main concern, that is commending Jesus and faith in Jesus. John would clearly wish us to use his gospel for that same purpose. What are the issues involved in doing so?

We have already explored the question of John and history. The question of context also obviously applies, when we consider John's portrayal of Jesus. John faced particular questions about Jesus, for example questions about Jesus' relationship to John the Baptist. We will probably not meet many people today who want to claim the Baptist as the Messiah rather than Jesus! However, questions of the identity of Jesus do continue to be important – both in Christian discussion and in discussion with non-Christians.<sup>58</sup> And in that context the testimony of the disciple whom Jesus loved will continue to be of vital importance.

*Was and is the gospel evangelistic?*

Scholars have discussed whether John's gospel was intended to be an evangelistic document aimed at non-Christians or not. One of the debated questions is whether John 20:31 'These things are written, that you may

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<sup>57</sup> Whether John knew the synoptic gospels themselves or not is disputed; but it is quite feasible that he did, or at least that he knew the sort of picture that they presented.

<sup>58</sup> Even the question of John the Baptist and Jesus might be said to be still alive, in the sense that some scholars see Jesus just as one of various first century Jewish prophetic figures.

believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' indicates an evangelistic purpose. There is an interesting tiny textual variant in the Greek manuscripts of the gospel relevant to this point: in some 'that you may believe' is a present subjunctive tense (*pisteuete*), in others an aorist subjunctive tense (*pisteusetete*). It has conventionally been said that an aorist tense has punctiliar force, so that John would mean 'These things are written so that you may come to faith ...', *i.e.* for an evangelistic purpose; the present, on the other hand, is said to suggest something continuous, so that John would mean 'so that you may go on believing', *i.e.* John is writing to keep his readers in their faith.

It is very difficult to be sure which the original text is on this occasion, but it is also difficult to be sure of how much difference the choice of tenses actually makes. It may very well be that the author had a dual purpose in mind – *i.e.* to strengthen Christians in their own faith and to help them in their witness to others, whether Jews, followers of the Baptist, or schismatics from the church. He will not have expected the gospel to be handed out to non-Christians in the way that is possible today in the age of mass-production printing, but he will surely have wanted his gospel to be used in Christian evangelism.

### *John's Jesus*

How does John present Jesus? It is only necessary to recap here, by observing that the Jesus whom John offers is (a) 'Messiah', *i.e.* not just a brightly shining religious star who appeared out of nowhere in first century Palestine, but someone who fits into and fulfils the story of God's dealings with his people and the world described in the OT. But this Jesus is also (b) a revelation of the unseen God. In our scientific age it becomes clearer and clearer how unutterably great must be the God who is behind our world; it is certainly beyond our human capacities to work him out. Unless he chooses to reveal himself. And that is precisely what John claims: that Jesus is a word from God, a word taking human form, and revealing a God of love and greatness, who is as good news in the twentieth century as in the first.

But the main way John presents Jesus is not in conceptual form, but in story, or rather history, form, since that is how God revealed himself. And John offers a variety of stories to show how Jesus met and challenged individuals – from the academic religious man Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, perhaps nervously, to the sinful and irreligious Samaritan woman by the well. Jesus' challenge to the first is that he needs to shed his academic and religious pretensions and to be born again by the Spirit of God, and to the second is that he can offer her living water that is eternally satisfying in place of her socially and sexually disoriented life.

Although Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman (and the others who feature in the gospel) are miles away socially and culturally from people today, John tells the stories to his readers, who were already culturally a step removed from first century Palestine, to persuade them of the truth of Jesus of Nazareth and of the life-giving relevance of Jesus to them. In using his gospel today we will need to explain the stories (since people today know even less about Samaritan women than John's readers!) and to apply them in our terms and to our questions, but the stories themselves, deriving from one who was so close to Jesus, remain powerful evidence for people today of the truth about Jesus.

### *Believing*

And the response that John looked for was 'that you may believe': for John believing is 'believing that' Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and also 'believing in' him. John expresses 'believing in' in various other ways: thus in 6:35 he speaks of the person who 'comes to me ... and believes in me'. The 'coming' is not just a matter of physical movement, but it is a response of acceptance. Precisely that sort of language is used in the important verses in 1:11-13: 'He came to his own, but his own did not receive him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who are born not of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God'. It is by receiving Jesus that people enter the family of Jesus (which is what eternal life is all about), being born again by God's Spirit.<sup>59</sup>

For John this sort of believing and receiving of Jesus is only possible through the work of God's Spirit. People are naturally blinded by the devil, the prince of this 'world', and so 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (6:44). John is under no illusion that preaching Jesus, or writing his gospel, will automatically convert people; indeed he writes in face of a distressing amount of unbelief and false belief.

And yet, although it is the work of the Spirit of God to bring people to new birth, still John believes the Holy Spirit works in and through the disciples' witness and through his own witness as he writes the gospel, 'so that you may believe'. That is why he writes the gospel.

### *Finally*

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<sup>59</sup> In John's understanding that 'receiving' of Jesus and putting faith in him was probably understood in terms of baptism: baptism was not a cultural rite for babies with little meaning, but a public act of commitment to Jesus and a public way of entering his family and fellowship. We need to recapture that understanding of baptism in the church today, making sure that, whether it is babies or adults who are baptized, baptism expresses commitment. John would certainly not believe that baptism by itself unaccompanied by any faith is of any value or importance; it is believing in Jesus that is essential.

If ch. 21 is seen as some sort of appendix to the gospel, then the gospel proper ends with the story of doubting Thomas. And this story, found only in John, sums up much of what the gospel is about. Thomas finds it hard to 'believe' in Jesus' resurrection, even though the other disciples have told him that they have seen Jesus. Thomas wants first-hand, tangible proof, if he is to believe; in some ways he is a very twentieth-century man! Then Jesus appears to him, and Thomas has before his own eyes the proof he wants. Jesus says: 'Don't be unbelieving, but believe', and Thomas responds with the words 'My Lord and my God'. This is where John wants all his readers to end up – responding to the 'signs' of Jesus and coming to a faith not just in Jesus' divinity but in Jesus as 'my' Lord and God.

We might expect John to end the story with Thomas's words of worship. But he gives the last word to Jesus. Jesus says: 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' That comment of Jesus could sound like a put-down and like an anticlimax after the climax of Thomas's confession. But in fact they are important for John as a promise of the risen Jesus to the readers of his gospel (and others) who will not have the visible, tangible proof that Thomas had, but who will have the witness to Jesus and his signs that John has given them. Jesus' words are an encouragement to John's readers, who may indeed be having doubts because they live in a doubting environment, and equally to modern readers who may also have doubts, to believe and to go on believing, in the light of the evidence presented in the gospel.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> There is a vast literature available on John's gospel, and I am indebted to all sorts of people. The commentary that comes closest to my view is that of D.A. Carson (Leicester:IVP, 1991). R.E. Brown's older Anchor Bible commentary is another useful resource (London:Chapman, 1966). For a brief and recent commentary R.A. Whitacre's is excellent (Leicester:IVP, 1999). For historical approaches to John, Robinson's *Priority of John* is important, and most recently Craig Blomberg's *Historical Reliability of John* is very valuable. For less-historical-critical views, John Ashton's *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford, 1994) is a major study; Maurice Casey's *Is John's Gospel True?*, to which I have referred frequently, is a hard-hitting, if seriously mistaken, critique of historical readings of John and of John's gospel itself. As a general introduction to John and to scholarly study of John perhaps the most useful book is S.S. Smalley, *John Evangelist and Interpreter* (Carlisle:Paternoster, second edition 1998). On the theology of John G.R. Beasley-Murray's *Gospel of Life* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) is helpful. C. Bennema's 'The Power of Saving Wisdom' (Mohr, 2002) is an interesting recent discussion. I have worked out some of my own ideas in more detail in 'The Enigma of John's Gospel: Another Look', published in *Tyndale Bulletin* 1997 and in *Understanding, Study and Reading: Essays in Honour of John Ashton*, eds. C. Rowland and C. Fletcher-Louis (Sheffield Academic, 1997).

(Back Cover)

The Gospel of John, often described as a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant may swim, is unique amongst the gospels. With its own themes, stories and ideas, it presents a powerful message. However, the fourth gospel has often been criticised, with questions surrounding its theology, historicity, and relationships with the synoptic Gospels. In this booklet, New Testament scholar, David Wenham, looks at these and other issues. Engaging with modern debate, Wenham presents an extremely helpful and accessible work which will help any student of the Bible interested in these questions.

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