

January 7: John 1

## Introduction to the Gospel of John

*Clement of Alexandria (2<sup>nd</sup> Century) said that while the synoptic gospels set forth “physical things,” John wrote a “spiritual gospel.”*

*Origen (3<sup>rd</sup> century) said that the gospels were the “first fruits of all scripture”, and John was “the first fruits of the gospels.”*

*Augustine (4<sup>th</sup> century) said that the synoptic gospels were gospels “of the flesh” but that John was the “gospel of the Spirit.”*

*John Calvin (16<sup>th</sup> century) said that while the synoptic gospels reveal the body of Jesus, the gospel of John reveals the soul of Jesus.*

*And finally, Martin Luther (16<sup>th</sup> century) wrote that John’s gospel is “far to be preferred over the other three because it will show you Christ and teach you everything you need to know.”*

What is it about John that inspired such lofty praise from such notable theologians? Perhaps it’s that 90% of the content of the gospel of John is not found in the synoptic gospels, it is DIFFERENT. Or, perhaps it’s John’s style –it is a soaring masterpiece of ancient literature, the Greek used in the gospel of John is elevated, it’s the language of poetry. Or, perhaps John is preferred by theologians because John is both gospel account and work of theology, with narration throughout the gospel describing the meaning and significance of the events of Jesus’ life and his sayings.

The gospel of John is broken up into two sections: The book of signs from 1:19-12:50, and the book of glory from 13:1-20:31.

Who wrote the gospel of John? While the authorship is officially anonymous –“the beloved disciple” being named at the end of the gospel as the one who wrote these things down- church tradition connects this “beloved disciple” with John Zebedee because he is not otherwise mentioned in the gospel of John, though he was a prominent apostle. It’s possible that the gospel we have right now is a 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> draft of the work, and that some sections were originally written by John and then added onto later in history as the church developed an understanding of the meaning and significance of the events in their time and place around the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Martin Luther believed that perhaps the “beloved disciple” was Lazarus, who is said to have travelled with the apostles in the week before Jesus died and who is twice named as “someone whom Jesus loved” in the gospel itself. Another, perhaps more likely theory, is that the author (or at least the editor) of the gospel of John is “John the Elder” –the author of 1-3 letters of John). John the Elder is said to be an educated student of the uneducated apostle John. While there are many theories, there is no certainty on who authored the work or how it came to be, but scholars do agree that the gospel was produced in a Christian community founded by one of Jesus’ original disciples, and that it was written and edited with close ties to that apostolic tradition.

The problem of John: unavoidable anti-semitic tones. When we read John we have to be honest about how bad some of this work sounds to our modern ears, and that some of the polemical language was used for the particular circumstances surrounding the Christian community in the first century, but no longer apply to us and our relationship with our Jewish neighbors today. The community in which John was written were on the defensive against their Jewish neighbors who likely participated in making life difficult for them because of their Christian faith. This is why “the Jews” are portrayed as Jesus’ opponent throughout the gospel, because the Christian community at the time of this writing felt threatened by their Jewish neighbors and felt that they had to intellectually prove the validity of their belief in Jesus over and against the beliefs of their neighbors. When we read “the Jews” in the gospel of John, we must read these words with remorse at all of the ways through history these words have been used to biblically support anti-Semitism, and we must read them as referring only to the

specific group of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish neighbors with whom the authors were arguing, and not as a symbol for all Jews for all time.

## Chapter 1

Vs. 1-18, The Prologue. Jesus is referred to as the Word. In Greek Philosophy, this is the same as Logos, which is the ultimate truth or reason. In John's gospel, this title is used for Jesus to connect him with the eternal divine entity who becomes human in Jesus Christ. The prologue provides readers with the theological framework necessary to rightly understand the stories of Jesus that follow. Jesus is not just the Messiah of Israel, but the eternal Son of God. Jesus was present at creation, Jesus was the content of God's speech (the Word) which spoke all things into existence. Jesus is God. And Jesus brings life, which is the light of all people. Most importantly, Jesus brings HOPE, for the light he brings will never be overcome by the darkness of our world.

John the Baptist is introduced in vs. 6 as the one sent by God to bear witness to the light, so that ALL PEOPLE might believe through him. This gospel gets a bad rap for its dualistic models (which come from Greek philosophy) and it's in vs. out crowd mentality which is a result of living as a minority group in a dangerous world, but from the very beginning of this gospel it's clear that God's dream for our world is for ALL PEOPLE to receive and experience the light and life of Jesus. Vs. 11-13 offers a mini-outline of the trajectory of John's gospel: Jesus brings an offer of life with God, but not all people accept the revelation of God that Jesus brings, thus this gospel will be full of stories of both acceptance and rejection of Jesus. In telling these stories of Jesus, John provides the reader/listener with their own experience of the revelation of God in Jesus, and thus places in their hands the same situation the characters of the gospel find themselves in. Through receiving Jesus, God offers the most amazing gift of all, adoption into God family as God's own children –born of God's will! Knowing Jesus is the way we come to know God, for Jesus is God's own manifestation in the world.

Vs. 19-34, The religious authorities in Jerusalem sent investigators out into the wilderness to question John as to his true identity. He was gaining quite a following, he was preaching and teaching and baptizing. They wanted to know why he did these things, what was the purpose? John says he is not the Messiah, or Elijah, or a prophet (this differs from the synoptic gospels which definitely paint John as a prophet and even as Elijah returned). John says he is simply the one who is there to point out the Messiah when he sees him. In John's gospel, it is John the Baptist (and no one else) who sees the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus, and this doesn't necessarily happen at the point of Jesus' baptism. John announces that Jesus is the lamb of God (connecting to the Passover lamb who saves the people from death), and he says that Jesus is the Son of God (which is another title for Messiah). These events unfold over a few days, as the next day John sees Jesus walking by again and now points him out to his disciples, who decide to leave John and follow Jesus instead (which is John's divine purpose, to point others to Jesus). The disciples then seem to take up this mantle of evangelism, as Andrew finds his brother Simon and brings him to meet Jesus, and then later Philip brings Nathaniel along for the journey of meeting Jesus. In John's gospel, Jesus doesn't call the disciples, but their spiritual curiosity compels them to seek him for themselves. Jesus simply responds "Come and see." Jesus invites them to experience life with him, rather than telling them what they need to believe about him.