

GOSPEL OF JOHN

Introduction

John's Gospel has been called the 'spiritual' gospel. One reason for this is that Jesus not only ends up in heaven after his resurrection but comes down from heaven into the world rather than simply born like any other child. And this is no denigration of physical birth or humanity. Rather, it is to emphasize rebirth as a spiritual and divine process different than natural birth. Jesus the divine Word made flesh has come to rebirth life eternal in all who open their hearts to his way, truth and life.

This also means Jesus is more self-conscious of his heavenly origin and destiny in this gospel, and he speaks more directly of his divine identity. He also uses spiritual language that requires special understanding.

The author of the gospel is said to be the 'beloved disciple' mentioned throughout as one of the 12. Traditionally, the beloved disciple has been associated with John. The date the gospel was written is also believed to be later than the other three, perhaps in the early 90s of the 1st century. Even though John's gospel contains many central themes of the story of Jesus, it also has distinctive features about it that distinguish it from the other gospels.

STRUCTURE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

1) The gospel begins by tracing back Jesus' origins all the way to God before the world was created. Jesus is not only identified with God's creating Word but is also presented as being the incarnation of God's love come to heal and bring the light of God into a world enveloped in darkness. Despite the hope inherent in Jesus having come into the world to save it, there is a clear indication, tragically, that he will be rejected by the majority. By rejecting Jesus, people are also rejecting God.

2) The first 11 chapters of John have been called the book of 'signs.' Jesus performs miracles which are called 'signs' indicating that they point beyond themselves to a more deeply spiritual significance. They point to the true nature of who Jesus is and challenge the audience to respond with faithful receptivity.

3) Interspersed between the signs and especially after the last supper, Jesus offers long discourses in which he makes some dramatic interpretations about who he is and how people should respond to him. Unlike the other gospels, John's Jesus talks about himself rather than the kingdom of God - i.e. 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the light of the world,' in contrast to: 'The kingdom of God is like....' Followed by a parable.

4) As the story progresses, it reveals a growing opposition to Jesus on the part of a group called 'the Jews.' This group is not the Jewish people as a whole, but rather, the leadership of the Jewish people with the religious and political power, especially those in and around the temple in the capital city Jerusalem. They are, however, also Jesus'

own people and that's what makes his rejection painful. They plot to kill him and are successful in the end, although Jesus anticipates this and speaks of larger purposes of God at work.

5) After the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11, the focus of the gospel shifts to Jesus' anticipated death. The death is framed as a 'glorification'. Of course, it is sad that Jesus' own people reject him, but the glory is in God's salvation at work through Jesus' death. His resurrection and return to heaven complete the journey and sets the stage for the new age of the Spirit. Jesus' followers will live out God's salvation with Jesus among them through the Spirit – the Advocate/comforter/counselor.

6) The life of Jesus is not told as consisting of a single year as in the other gospels, culminating in holy week at Jerusalem. Rather, the Jesus of John's gospel journeys to Jerusalem a number of times over a 3-year period. Moreover, these journeys to Jerusalem indicate the importance of the Temple, the Jewish festivals and the religious calendar as a focus of Jesus' ministry and message.

THEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

1) John presents the ministry and purpose of Jesus' coming in strongly dualistic terms. There is light vs darkness, heaven vs this world, truth vs lies, God vs the rulers of this world. The world and its inhabitants are trapped within a negative and destructive dynamic of sin requiring the light of God's love to shine in and transfigure the world, beginning with human hearts.

2) There is strong opposition to Jesus by 'the Jews', and as the 1st chapter says: 'he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.' This viewpoint not only informs much of the gospel, but it also governs much of the plot. Again, however, God overrules human wickedness and malicious intent, by bringing about salvation through the suffering/death/resurrection (glorification) of Jesus.

3) In this gospel more than the others, Jesus originates from heaven directly and will return there when he is glorified. The descent / ascent motif is present throughout the gospel and gives us a Jesus more divine than in the other gospels. In this gospel, Jesus is surer of himself, and he agonizes less about his impending suffering and death. Nonetheless, there are also wonderful, vivid moments where Jesus' humanity comes to the fore in a way unique compared to the other gospels (such as his intense weeping at the grave of Lazarus).

The purpose of the gospel is stated outright at the end: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.' (20: 30-31)

JOHN 1

1) From the very beginning, John's gospel makes it clear that the gospel is not intended to be a simple narration of Jesus' life but, rather, a reflection of the absolute importance of Jesus for life eternal. The opening poem (vs 1-18) already anticipates a number of central themes within the gospel as a whole:

- The relationship of Jesus with God; the sharp division between those who believe and those who do not (light and darkness);
- the life of Jesus as a revelation of his glory;
- the importance of the incarnation as an event in history;
- the rejection of Jesus that reveals the darkness that has enveloped humanity;
- the special role that testimony plays in persuading the reader to believe in Jesus.

2) The meaning of the poem is clear: Jesus Christ is not just a prophet or a saviour, but the very incarnation of the Word of God, the active power of God involved in creating the world and bringing new life (rebirth) into it.

3) The flow of the poem begins with the Word, the Word which is a person, a person who is life and light come to a world of darkness and death. The Word incarnate comes into a world, but a world that will reject him. Nonetheless, there will be those who will be open to the light and as a result will be born again by God. This Word made flesh is identified with Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, Jesus has the supreme role of being the revelation of God ('No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' V.18)

4) The remainder of the chapter offers testimony to Jesus' identity as God's beloved Word made flesh. Vs. 19-34 offers us the testimony of John the Baptist, and vs. 35-51 the testimony of the first disciples called. The importance of John at this point is to proclaim who he is not, making way for the truth of who Jesus is. John is not the messiah as some suggest. But also, he builds up expectation by prophesying that the messiah is coming soon. Finally, John identifies the Messiah with Jesus by calling him 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' At this point John is also speaking about the role of the Messiah – he will take away sin and redeem the world.

5) Even though the metaphor of the lamb slain for the sin of the world can be connected to the Passover feast where lambs are slain (the Passover being the night when Jesus is crucified), the truth is, Passover was never associated with atonement for sin. More suggestive is the reference in Isaiah 53 about the suffering servant who is slain as a lamb led to the slaughter for the atonement of his peoples' sin; or also in passages in the Old Testament where a lamb may be offered as a sin offering (Exodus 29:38ff).

6) While John baptizes with water, Jesus will bestow the Holy Spirit, the source of new birth. Even though the first disciples follow Jesus in astonishment and amazement, he builds up further expectation by declaring: "Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.