



Introduction to John

SESSION 2

| *Who wrote the Gospel of John and why?*

Introduction

In the first session of this study, we found that the Gospel of John has a number of distinctive features that set it apart from the other Gospels in the New Testament. In this session we'll explore various suggestions about how this Gospel came to be so different from the others. Do its peculiarities have to do with who wrote it or when and where it was written? Do they have to do with the audience and the purpose for which it was written?

The "Spiritual Gospel"

Near the end of the second century, an early Christian philosopher named Clement of Alexandria related a tradition according to which the apostle John knew that the other Gospels already contained the "physical facts" about Jesus, and therefore, at the urging of his disciples and under the inspiration of the Spirit, he composed a "spiritual Gospel." This explanation has been quite influential in the interpretation of this Gospel, though it leaves some questions unanswered. What is meant by a "spiritual Gospel"? Does John contain "spiritual truths" as opposed to "historical facts"? How did Clement know that John wrote this Gospel, since the Gospel itself does not name its author?

Other second-century Christian writers also identify the apostle John the son of Zebedee as the Gospel's author, but there is no way of determining how or when this tradition originated and little evidence to confirm it. The Gospel's references to "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23–26; 19:26–27; 20:2–10; 21:7, 20–25) have often been taken to specify him as the author of the book: "This is



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the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true"¹ (21:24; compare 19:35). But even this could simply refer to an oral testimony that contributed to the later writing of the Gospel. Some scholars even consider the "beloved disciple" to be a symbolic figure, perhaps standing for the particular Christian community associated with the book or for an authentic way of being a disciple of Jesus. Unfortunate though it may seem to us, we simply cannot be certain of the author's identity. We may accept the early tradition, or we may seek alternative possibilities (Lazarus, whom Jesus is said to love in 11:5, has been mentioned; so has Mary Magdalene), or we may learn to live with yet one more mystery about this rather mysterious Gospel. I will continue to refer to "the Gospel of John," but only as the ordinary name of the book, not as implying a decision about who wrote it.

The notion that John is a "spiritual Gospel" does seem to capture something essential about it. John speaks of the Holy Spirit more often and more significantly than any other Gospel (3:5–8; 7:37–39; 14:15–17, 25–26;

16:7–15; 20:22–23; and elsewhere), and we find Jesus saying such things as “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:24) and “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (6:63). In a real sense, this Gospel is about encountering truth and eternal life, and if these things are associated with spirit, then this certainly is a spiritual Gospel.

Still, the expression “spiritual Gospel” is ambiguous. Think for a minute about all the things that get covered under the heading of “spirituality” today! In particular, thinking of John as the spiritual Gospel tends to focus our attention on its meaning for the individual soul. Because John focuses on eternal life, it is often seen as essentially a book about salvation, that is, about how I can believe in Jesus properly so that I will go to heaven when I die. We don’t tend to think of John when we are considering issues of social justice or even the life of the church. Some aspects of the Gospel encourage this individualistic approach. In its Easter narrative, for instance, instead of a story about a group of women coming to Jesus’ tomb on Sunday morning, we get a very moving and intense narrative about one woman, Mary Magdalene, and her encounter with the risen Savior. By focusing on Mary, John’s Easter story becomes one of personal encounter with Jesus.

Such encounter is certainly a significant theme in John. But the spirituality of the Fourth Gospel is not simply an individualistic one. John is not addressed merely to individuals but to believers living in community with one another, as members of the “flock” of the Good Shepherd (10:1–18), as branches sharing the life of the Vine (15:1–8). John distills the ethical teaching of Jesus down to one commandment: “love one another” (13:34–35; 15:12–17), implying that the spiritual life is possible only in relationship with other believers.

The Gospel of the Heretics?

As critical scholarship examined the New Testament Gospels in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, John’s differences from the others came to stand out in sharp relief. Then, as efforts were made to place the Gospels within the early history of Christianity, and as texts were discovered that came from outside the mainstream orthodoxy of the church’s first few centuries, a new possibility was raised to account for those differences.

The Gospel’s hostility to “the world” and the dualistic way in which it speaks about “above” and “below,” light and darkness—including the way in which Jesus himself uses this kind of language—were compared with the speeches found in gnostic texts. These texts are also strongly dualistic, that is, they consider human life as taking place in a universe sharply divided between spirit and flesh, mind and matter. Gnostics are people who “know” that they are spiritual people—children of light from above—and therefore distance themselves from the flesh and fleshly people. The language and theology of the “spiritual Gospel” seemed to fit right in with this type of thinking.

Scholars also considered the exalted manner in which Jesus is presented in John, how he is so much “from above” that he seems set apart from the human race. He knows everything about everybody, even knowing what will happen before it happens (2:24–25; 5:6; 6:6, 64–71; 13:1–4, 11, 21–27; 16:19). Even on the cross, he is lucid and in control, making arrangements for his mother and seeing to it that the Scriptures are fulfilled (19:25–28). This emphasis on Jesus’ divinity at the expense of his humanity resembles the kind of theology called Docetism, a development within early Christianity that held that Jesus only appeared to be human but was in reality wholly divine.

The twentieth-century German critic Rudolf Bultmann and others, noting these factors and more, saw John as a response to Gnosticism. They suggested that the Gospel was rooted in gnostic thought and gnostic writings, even though in its present form it seemed intended to counter gnostic and docetic thinking. For instance, the prologue (John 1:1–18), which insists both on the divinity of the preexistent Word and that “the Word became flesh,” can be seen as an effort to contradict the idea that Jesus was divine but not really human. This prologue, however, seems readily detachable from the rest of the Gospel, so it was suggested that it was added on to provide an antidocetic framework to a Gospel with decidedly docetic features. Similarly, given that gnostics and Docetists did not take the sacrament of the Eucharist, or Lord’s Supper, very seriously as a receiving of the Son of God in the material form of bread and wine, it is noteworthy that there are no eucharistic words at the Last Supper in John 13. The crudely materialistic language about eating Jesus’ flesh

and drinking his blood in 6:51–58, then, could be another addition by an editor trying to distance this Gospel from Gnosticism and bring it into line with the developing orthodoxy of the church. Without such additions, John could be read as a gnostic interpretation of Jesus or as an adaptation of gnostic ideas for reflection on the meaning of Jesus. The additions would have made this Gospel “safe” for use in a church wherein gnostic thinking was considered heretical and dangerous.

There are problems with this way of explaining the Gospel of John. It is not really clear that Gnosticism, in its full-blown form, actually existed prior to the writing of this Gospel. It now seems likely that John was written in the last decade or two of the first century, prior to any definitely datable gnostic texts.

In general, the explanation of John as having gnostic origins depends quite a bit on reconstructing a Gospel different from the one that we have before us. This Gospel writer very likely drew on streams of tradition and thought that also contributed to the Gnosticism that was beginning to form at the same time. The gnostic explanation of John remains in play, but other possibilities may provide a more complete understanding of this Gospel.

“The Jews” and the Synagogue

The dualistic language of the Gospel of John and its insistence that Jesus and his disciples are “not of this world” (8:23; 14:30–32; 15:18–21; 17:14–16; 18:36) do have to be accounted for somehow. One way of doing this is to take note of other distinctive language in John. In particular, on three occasions we read of people potentially being “put out of the synagogue” (see 9:22; 12:42; and 16:2). The terminology used here, “to be *aposynagōgos*,” is not found in any other ancient text, Jewish or Christian, suggesting that a unique situation is in view. There is no other evidence of followers of Jesus being expelled from synagogues during his lifetime, nor is expulsion mentioned in the book of Acts or in Paul’s letters, using this or any other term. This could mean that the author of the Fourth Gospel invented the whole concept. Yet the threefold repetition and the specificity with which the term is used make it likely that it points to real circumstances, not in the time of Jesus but in the history of the Christian community for which John was written.

CHARACTERISTICS OF “SECTARIAN” GROUPS

Sociologists use the term *sect* not only for dissenting groups within Christianity but more generally as a term for divergent religious groups. Characteristics of such groups that are particularly relevant to the Gospel of John include the following:

- Protest against the way the world is organized, and in particular against the dominant religious culture
- A dualism between those on the inside of the sect and those on the outside; separation of the sect from “the world,” which is seen as evil and deluded
- Broader cosmic dualism, seeing the universe as divided between opposing forces of good and evil
- A claim to exclusive possession of truth and salvation; in some groups, an insistence on the need to openly confess or testify to this truth
- Voluntary membership
- A focus on internal unity and solidarity, expressed in terms of love and mutual care

Putting this together with other evidence in John, scholars such as Raymond E. Brown and J. Louis Martyn concluded that the community for which this Gospel was written was a Christian group still largely of Jewish background that was going through a painful separation from its parent religion. John’s hostile words about “the Jews” indicate the bitterness experienced and expressed on the Christian side of this separation. Particularly in this context, “the Jews” in John seem to be identical with “the Pharisees.” Though in earlier times the Pharisees had simply been one group or movement among others, in the years following the failure of the Jewish revolt against the Romans in the year 70, they or their descendants apparently took the leading role in synagogues in some places. Defending this role and seeking to purify the endangered Jewish communities from dissenting or borderline groups, they would have clashed with Jewish Christians still remaining in the synagogue.

In John's case, the Christian group seems to have become what sociologists of religion call a sect. In sociological language, *sect* is not a derogatory term but simply refers to a group that has broken ties with its parent religion and sees itself as being in possession of a truth that the parent body and other outsiders do not have (see the table).

In John's case, the parent body would be Judaism, and the exclusively held truth would be that Jesus is indeed "the Messiah, the Son of God" (20:31).

One way of understanding the origin of the Fourth Gospel, then, is to conceive of it as derived from traditions about Jesus that developed within a mainly Jewish Christian group that came under pressure from synagogue leaders, apparently Pharisees, because of its confession of faith in Jesus, most likely in the time after 70. Those who remained in the group were convinced that they knew the truth about Jesus and the truth about God that their belief in Jesus implied. They were willing to undergo a very difficult separation from the religious and social context that had given meaning to their lives, perhaps even involving the breaking of family ties (9:18–23). The Gospel responds to these circumstances by retelling the stories and words of Jesus in a greatly elaborated form, emphasizing that he and his followers know and speak the truth, while their opponents in the synagogue ("the Jews," "the world") are lost in darkness, and insisting on open confession of belief in him (3:16–21; 8:12–20, 32–47; 12:35–50; and elsewhere).

Not all scholars believe that it is possible to reconstruct such a historical development from what we read in John. However, such a process does have precedent in aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which also seem to come from a Jewish sect that experienced rejection and cultivated a dualistic worldview, and it explains (though it does not justify) both John's dualism and its hostility to "the Jews."

We Do Not Know Where It Comes From

Jesus' opponents in John do not know where he comes from (7:25–29; 8:14), and the same is true of the Spirit and those who are born of the Spirit (3:8). We might well say the same thing about this Gospel itself. The early tradition identifying the beloved disciple with the Gospel's author and with the apostle John may be correct, but this cannot be proven. At most, many scholars would see this disciple as an early eyewitness responsible for an oral tradition that was subsequently revised and written down by an unknown author or authors (perhaps in multiple stages) to create the Gospel as we know it. This author's profound insights and striking claims about Jesus and declarations about spirit, life, and truth have made the Gospel of John a favorite of many Christians and have been central resources for constructing Christian theology. Even as we affirm John's value, however, we should not overlook the likelihood that it originated in controversy, whether over a gnostic worldview or over the relationship between belief in Jesus and Jewish tradition. The mysteries surrounding the Gospel's origin need not detract from its worth for us. Indeed, in a world filled with controversy, in which Christianity's attachment to social and cultural power seems once again to be loosening, the spiritual Gospel may offer us unexpectedly potent resources. This will be the subject of the next session.

About the Writer

David Rensberger lives in Georgia and teaches New Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. He is the author of Johannine Faith and Liberating Community, which is about the Gospel of John, as well as two commentaries on the letters of John.

Endnote

1. All Scripture translations are from the New Revised Standard Version.