

2. Introductory Matters

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

The Gospel of John is a book unique in many ways. It is distinct from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew/Mark/Luke) in its content and chronology. Where the Synoptic Gospels cover a period of two and a half or three years, John's material (even though the same period of time is assumed) focuses upon approximately twenty days in the life of Jesus. In fact, chapters 13-20 occur within a twenty-four hour period. Many of the events recorded in the Synoptic Gospels are not found in John: the virgin birth, the Sermon on the Mount, the apocalyptic discourse, the parables, the transfiguration, the institution of the Lord's Supper, just to mention a few.

Where the Synoptic Gospels overlap in most of the material recorded within them, John has only an 8% overlap with the Synoptics. Approximately 92% of John's material is unique to him; this is especially so with the speeches and discourses in John. From John 20:30-31; 21:24-25, we learn that John had selected from a great mass of material available to him. What he selected was the result of the need he perceived his Gospel should address, which was undoubtedly aided by the inspiration of God (see John 14:26). We need, then, to study this Gospel as a composition unique in story selections and portrayal of Christ, with its own special portrait of Jesus and his message

JOHN'S CHRISTOLOGY

John's greatest contribution to our faith is found in his Christology; i.e., his answer to the question, "Who was this person Jesus of Nazareth?" His Gospel is developed, compositionally, to inform our faith christologically as we read through the text. This is evident from the first

chapter. John packs the first chapter with an array of Christological titles, and then unpacks each of them throughout the rest of his composition in unfolding his Christology. These titles are: the Word, God, life, light, flesh, the only begotten Son, he who comes, Jesus Christ, the only begotten God, the Lord, the Lamb of God, a man, Rabbi, the Messiah, him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph, the Son of God, the King of Israel, and the Son of Man.

Another way John develops his Christology is to set up an apologetic scenario; i.e., he sets up a block of material wherein certain *claims* are made, either by Jesus or others, and then follows with the presentation of a *case* supporting the claims. This is best seen in John 5, where in vv19-30 certain claims are made, then followed in vv 31-47 with a case designed to substantiate the claims made.

John's purpose in writing this Gospel, as stated in John 20:30-31, is to present Jesus to us in order that we might believe in him. He does this by painting a Christological portrait of him, using titles, arguments, stories about him, his many discourses, and much more as his colors, and our minds and hearts as the canvas upon which he paints. Whether the portrait takes, or is fully appreciated as the masterpiece it is, depends upon the reader.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS GOSPEL

The Prevalence of Themes Rather Than Events

The pre-existence and incarnation (chapter 1); signs/miracles (chapter 2), the new birth, love, kingdom of God, and eternal life (chapter 3), discourses on living water and worship (chapter 4), the Sabbath, Jesus' Messianic claims and the case for his claims (chapter 5), sermon on the bread of life (chapter 6), ever a man so spoke (chapter 7), discourse on truth (chapter 8), the light of the world (chapter 9), the good shepherd (chapter 10), the resurrection and the life (chapter 11), "follow me," "believe in me," "keep my words" (chapter 12), discipleship and humility, "I must go away" (chapter 13), "I am the way, the truth, and the life," discourse on the Holy Spirit (chapter 14), "you are my friends" (chapter 15), the comforter (chapter 16), the prayer for unity (chapter 17), arrest, trial, discussion concerning the kingdom (chapter 18), crucifixion and burial (chapter 19), resurrection and post-resurrection appearances (chapter 20), apostles sent forth to be fishers of men (chapter 21).

The Role of the Old Testament in Jesus' Teaching

In John 5 Jesus says:

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are those which testify of me. But you are not willing to come to me that you may have life (John 5:39-40).

Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you--Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (John 5:45-47).

Jesus clearly sees himself as a fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecy. Note the constant appeal to Old Testament events and figures: creation, the *shekinah* light as God's presence in the midst of Israel, the manna feeding of ancient Israel, the feasts of Israel and their interpretations, the appeal to great Biblical figures as Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, Isaiah, Jonah, etc.

Signs, Feasts, and Semitic Themes

John is unique in his presentation of miracles/signs (seven each). He mentions three (possibly four) Passovers. Jesus speaks to the Jews of: "Your law" and "your father Abraham," while he, himself, was a Jew. There are no parables in John. There is more preaching in John than any other Gospels. In John, Jesus appeals to numerous analogies: shepherds, vines and branches, bread, water, etc., as his major method of teaching. There is an early cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, but no late cleansing. He calls God "Father" in one hundred nineteen occurrences. There is also in John a curiosity which has created a great deal of interest among New Testament scholars, that is the affinity in theological ideas and vocabulary between the Gospel of John and the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Palestine in 1947.

AUTHORSHIP, DATE, AND PROVENANCE

The authorship of this Gospel has been accredited to John the apostle of Christ for the past two thousand years. Liberal scholars have challenged this in the 20th century, but the case for John's authorship is very strong.

There are a number of indications within the writing itself that point to John. There are personal allusions within the Gospel (i.e., "we" statements, etc.): 1:14; 19:35; 20:30-31; 20:7-10; 21:20-21; 21:24-25; see also I John 1:1-4. The name of John the apostle is never mentioned in this gospel; rather, he calls himself "that disciple" or "that disciple whom Jesus loved" (see: 18:15-16; 18:26-27; 20:2-8; 21:7, 20, 23, 24). He is mentioned as one of the sons of Zebedee in 21:2, which, according to the Synoptic Gospels, were James and John. The author vividly recalls what was said to "that disciple" at the last meal in the upper room (13:23-25; see the connection between these verses and 21:20-23).

He also mentions that when "that disciple" saw the empty tomb he believed (20:8). In the Gospel of John, "that disciple" is closely associated with Peter, in the Synoptic Gospels John and James are his close associates. In addition to this internal evidence, the external evidence for John's authorship is very strong. There are numerous good commentaries on John and excellent New Testament Introductions that give significant information on the external evidence for the authorship of John.

On dating John, we must rely on external evidence, which dates this Gospel in the last decade of the first century (90-100 AD). Many scholars argue that John wrote from Ephesus. This was argued because of the presence of so many Hellenistic (Greek-Oriental) terms and ideas found in the Gospel (e.g., the *logos* [word] doctrine, the dualisms: light vs dark, belief vs disbelief, flesh vs spirit, this world vs another world, hate vs love, death vs life, truth vs error, etc.). The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Southern Palestine in 1947 has changed this. Within these first century Jewish scrolls are found these same Hellenistic ideas and terminology. Most probably this gospel was written to Jewish Christians in Palestine in the last part of the first century who were experiencing significant persecution from the Jewish synagogue because of their belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the long expected Messiah.

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