

God Came Near

(The Fourth Gospel)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

The Gospel of John and Gnosticism

Let me introduce you to an area of study within Johannine scholarship that may be of interest or may give some possible insights as to why John's Gospel is developed the way it is; i.e., not like the Synoptic Gospels. John doesn't appear to be writing to give general information as Luke states he is doing. Rather, John puts his material together in such a way that a polemic agenda or intent appears to be present.

One of the best presentations of this argument is found in Elaine Pagels', *The Gnostic Gospels* and *Beyond Belief*. Scholars long believed that John's writings were written to address a Hellenistic-Jewish movement called "Gnosticism," taken from the Greek word "*gnosis*" from the verb "*ginosko*" meaning "I know." She argues that both the writings of Paul and John were used by the Gnostic movement to advance their views, but they distorted the message of Paul and John in the process. In 1945 a collection of 12 papyrus scrolls was discovered in Egypt in the desert of Nag Hammadi. They were written in Coptic, but were believed to have been originally written in Greek and then later translated into Coptic.

The Gospel of Thomas

One of the manuscripts of greatest interest was *The Gospel of Thomas* which was supposed to have been written by the Apostle Thomas, one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus, because Thomas' presentation of Jesus is very different from that of the other NT writings. The Jesus of this Gospel is presented not as a visitation of God himself, but as a heavenly revealer sent from God to impart secret enlightenment which would result in the

redemption of those who received it.

The reason the Gospel was of such great interest to Johannine scholars is that it was filled with so much of the terminology of John; i.e., *gnosis*, *logos*, *skotia*, *phos*, and *kosmos*, all depicted in a very Gnostic way. This Gospel was believed to reflect an early movement within the development of Christianity and the Gospel itself was conjectured to have been written somewhere near the time of John's writings, but was only circulated among the more esoteric groups of Jesus' followers.

Jesus is here presented as a Jewish sage whose mission on earth was to reveal secret knowledge to those in whom a presence of "the image of God" could be found. Jesus came from the Father of Light, and was himself a being of light who had taken on human substance. He was not divine but had the spark of divinity within him as did all human beings in whom dwelt the fragments of deity that fell to earth and became incarnate in human beings. This was the Gnostic Redeemer Myth they attached to Jesus.

Further, this world was seen as a realm of darkness and the whole objective of man is to find a way of escape out of the darkness. Jesus was the revealer of light whose light took the form of knowledge or illumination (*gnosis*) and showed those who will follow him how to escape the realm of darkness. Through the power of this knowledge and the denouncement of the world and its lord, Satan, (the ruler [archon] of darkness and of the world), those who accepted the knowledge imparted by Jesus could be returned to the Father of Lights at death as was the case with Jesus.

Movements within Early Christianity

It doesn't take much imagination to see the similarities between all of this and much of what is found in the NT. So, here was a different interpretation of the gospel of Jesus and a different movement within early Christianity than that found in the Synoptic Gospels of the NT canon.

Within this movement called Gnosticism one views the world as evil and the human race as beings created in the image of God (which is represented by the glow of divine light with each person) and is awakened within each of us when we are illuminated by the knowledge of God.

Christological Heresies

The Gospel of John appears to be an attempt to correct this view and the other many erroneous views of Gnosticism. In John the world is not intrinsically evil; rather, it is a realm in which evil is allowed to reign through the exercise of the free will of man. The evil rule in the world is the result of an occupation of this realm of existence by the satanic forces and those who choose to follow him. The rewards for allegiance to Satan are pleasure, power, and willful ignorance or delusion.

John sees the world as the stage upon which the conflict between good and evil is played out between those who love the light and those who love the darkness. The themes John is concerned to define are: belief in who Jesus of Nazareth truly is, true light (revelation from God), and *agape* (divine-like moral character). These are the themes he develops in his Gospel and further develops in his letters. Of course, the most important of these concerns whom Jesus and his interpretation of what existence in this world is all about.

The terminology used by both writers is similar which leads some scholars to think that John himself is Gnostic. In both Jesus speaks of “gnosis” as revelation from God. In both Jesus speaks of light and darkness. In both Satan is portrayed as one who rules in this world; and in both, man is identified as a being in darkness who is in need of redemption or deliverance from the power of the darkness.

In Gnostic interpretation Jesus was one sent from God in the likeness of fallen man, who was given power from the Ancient of Days to awaken the image of God in man by quickening the spark of divinity (the divine image) through illumination or secret *gnosis*. In Gnostic Christology Jesus is not God; rather, he is the representative of God who brings the message or *gnosis* of God to man. He is a redeemer figure of divine light (*phos*), or reason (*logos*), or knowledge (*gnosis*).

John’s Gospel a Christological Apology

With this historical setting before us one can better see why John develops his redemption story as he does. John’s Gospel was the last of the four canonical Gospels to be written. There was little need to repeat or add

to the synoptic gospels already in existence. John's agenda was to address the misinterpretation of Jesus' identity and his message. His Gospel was more of a "Christological Apology," in that it was a presentation of argumentation in defense of the proposition that the historical figure Jesus was the Son of God and as such was both "one of us" and "God with us." The word "apology" is appropriate here in that it is taken from the Greek *apologia* meaning, a presentation of argumentation or a defense of a proposition one holds to be true. An *apologia* may also be seen as a refutation of something one holds to be false or untrue. Here it was the Christological heresy of Docetic Gnosticism which taught that Jesus was a heavenly being who had come to earth to call those who had fallen from heaven to earth and had become enslaved in human bodies and had lost the knowledge (*gnosis*) of who they were. Jesus as the *logos* (the word of God spoken rather than written) who had come into the world to awaken the fallen from their slumber in darkness and lead them back into the realm of light where exists the Father of Light. These Gnostics believed Jesus of Nazareth to have been an ordinary human into whom the heavenly redeemer or *logos* had entered to bring enlightenment to the fallen beings of light and when Jesus was crucified on the cross, the spiritual *logos* came out of him and only the human Jesus of Nazareth experienced death. Further, they did not believe the body of Jesus was resurrected; the spirit of the redeemer *logos* simply appeared to the disciples after Jesus had been buried. This scenario may be seen in the works of the liberal scholars of Europe Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, pp 188-90, and Rudolf Bultmann, *The Theology of the NT*, vol 1, pp 166-67, 196-98, as well as other works by the same scholars and their colleagues of the early twentieth century.

That the Fourth Gospel was written to refute this and other versions of the Gnostic heresy may be seen from the opening lines to the last lines of this composition. Jesus is not only a representative sent from God to bring the world another message from God; Jesus was the personification of the message sent from God, the word or *logos* who was not only with God in the beginning and was identified with the very name "God" (John 1:1-18). Rather than see the world as the creation of an evil deity or demiurge, as did the Gnostics, Jesus is identified as the very one responsible for its creation (John 1:3).

Rather than see the world as evil Jesus transforms what is here into things of wonder: water into wine, fish and bread into a banquet for thousands to eat. He takes mud and places it on the eyes of a blind man and

restores his sight. Rather than see the death of his friend Lazarus as an escape from somatic imprisonment, he miraculously return him to his earthly body as a sign of his true identity, he was a man created in the image of God, not a creature of mud or clay in which the true man was imprisoned.

John clearly identifies Jesus with the Jewish messianic expectation (1:19-51), rather than portraying him as an esoteric being of light who secretly passes through the human race revealing the *gnosis* that will awaken them. Rather than speak of himself as a being of light sent as a representative of the Father of Lights, Jesus identified himself as the very presence of the Father himself (John 14:9). The light with which Jesus identified himself was the light representative of the Jewish concept of the presence of God – the *Shekhinah* – as is reflected in John 10:22-39.

John's letter's most likely appeared before the Gospel, with this knowledge of the Gnostic heresy, the refutation of Gnosticism can be seen in many of John's comments. In 1 John 2:1-4, the incarnation of Jesus is affirmed, in 1:9-11 a reaction to the factionalism and ill will that existed within certain communities of believers may be seen. In 2:18-23 John warns of the antichrists, a word made up of the preposition *anti* meaning "against" and *christos* meaning "Christ." This is not some specific "son of Satan," who would rise up to lead the forces of evil against the forces of good. The term John uses is plural indicating that he is speaking of all those who are "against Christ," or more specifically, against Jesus who is the Christ. As he says in 2:26, "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray." He specifically address the Docetic heresy in 4:

*This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that **Jesus Christ has come in the flesh** is from God, **3**but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (4:2-3).*

Here is why John's Christology is called a higher Christology than that of the Synoptic writers. The Synoptic writers were telling the story they experienced with the assumption that what they saw and heard from this prophet of Galilee was what everyone saw and heard up until the time of the crucifixion. John is more concerned with revealing the mystery of the incarnation and that in Jesus of Nazareth God was here. The discourses of

Jesus concerning his having come down from God and his being in existence before Abraham were all delivered in Jerusalem where Jesus spent only a little time and addressed his message to a much different audience than existed in Galilee. Jerusalem was filled with Hellenistic Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem for the Jewish feasts and there was the scribal community who had become entrusted with the responsibility of informing the faith of Israel. The boldness of his claims in John's Gospel is to be understood in light of who he was trying to reach and what he was trying to make them see that they should have been able to see; as he says in John 5:39, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you might find eternal life and these are they that testify of me."

Conclusion

The last chapter of the Fourth Gospel makes clear the intentions of John in writing this Gospel. That the historical Jesus of Nazareth was raised from death may be seen in John 20:

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." 28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed," 30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:26-31).

John further affirms his witness to the things about which he wrote in 21:24-25.

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. 25 Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.