

Introduction to the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John is more than a historical account: it is a book about theological truth. In the Synoptic Gospels (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the manhood of Jesus is emphasised more than His divinity. In the Gospel of John it is His divinity which is emphasised. In the Gospel of John the ministry is timeless and Jesus is changeless; in the Synoptics Jesus is shown working towards a goal which is not reached during His ministry (Luke ch. 12 v50 and ch. 13 v33).

The author assumed that his readers had a knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, and although throughout the narrative the Jews are the opponents of Jesus there is nothing but respect for the Old Testament and for the Judaism of the past. St. John shows an intimate knowledge of the Jewish law and of the teaching of contemporary Rabbis. This gospel recognises Jesus as more than the Jewish Messiah: it shows Him as God.

The introduction to the book (the Prologue) sets forth the themes of the Gospel. We shall consider these: Life, Light and Darkness, Witness, World, Glory and Truth. C. K. Barratt identifies chapter 1 verse 14, "*The Word became flesh*" as "the climax of New Testament Christology". These verses are read every Christmas Eve as the climax to the service of lessons and carols from Kings College, Cambridge.

The Gospel, however, is not just an important source of theology. John tells us a story. The characters in his narrative are drawn with supreme artistry. Thus we feel we know Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

The Prologue is written in simple language which has a unique grandeur. Isn't it amazing that we do not know who it is about until verse 17? At the conclusion of the Prologue in verse 18 John reminds us of verse 1. There is no possibility of us knowing God except through Jesus Christ, the Word.

Life

The Prologue begins with God Himself before creation – the Word. In this self-disclosure was LIFE (v4 "*In Him was life*"). So the author of the Gospel introduces us to the first of his great themes. There follow encounters which Jesus had with various people in which discussion about life was crucial. By recoding the story of the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of his Gospel, John implies that neither the Law nor the sacrificial system could of themselves bring life.

When Jesus met Nicodemus He was encountering a man who was a firm adherent of the Law, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. In order for him to have life, he must be "born again". The Life which Jesus offers comes by water and the Spirit, by cleansing from sin and by an infilling of God's very Presence in the life of the believer. How can a

person know this new life? John ch. 3 v 16 tells us, ***“Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life”***. Sadly the new life is not automatic for everyone, for some will choose not to accept the gift and so will condemn themselves to an existence without eternal life.

The second story (chapter 4 v 1 – 42) tells of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The contrast with Nicodemus could hardly be greater, but Jesus was totally at ease with both people and He gives to her the same opportunity to accept His gift of life as He had given to Nicodemus (chapter 4 v 10). The following discussion about worship leads to teaching that worship is a spiritual thing and comes as a result of the new life Jesus offers as His gift. Her immediate reaction was to share with others the news of her new life.

The third story concerns the official’s son (chapter 4 v 43 – 54). Jesus was moved by compassion for this father and He promised life to his son. The fulfilment of the promise made by Jesus resulted in the belief which led to life. Once again life was given by the Word Who expressed the person and nature of God.

Other outstanding statements about the theme of life are contained in this Gospel: chapter 5 vv 24 and 40, 6 v 35 and 10 v 10.

However the most significant narrative centred on the theme of life must be the account in chapter 11 of the raising of Lazarus. John Marsh regards 11 vv 25 and 26 as probably the very greatest saying in the whole Bible. Resurrection and life are complementary aspects of the same thing – new life is the product of resurrection.

Martha’s response to Jesus is revolutionary. She realised that resurrection life that triumphs over death is not confined to the distant future but is present here and now. Physical death will happen, of course, but the life possessed by the believer will never die. In Jesus the possession of eternal life is a fact of present experience. The believer never dies spiritually because he cannot be apart from the One whose life is within him.

The writer has shown Jesus as the giver of (1) material life – water into wine, (2) spiritual life – His encounter with Nicodemus, (3) physical life – the official’s son and (4) eternal life – His encounter with Martha.

In chapter 14 v 6 Jesus memorably states, ***“I am the Life”***. The life that Jesus is cannot be outside Himself; it is not something He picks up and gives out; He Himself is the life. Thus Jesus is the life of those who believe in Him. The commentators all agree that we shall never be able to explore the full riches of this verse. Jesus is the supreme life in which all who believe share.

Light and Darkness

A second theme of the fourth Gospel is light – ***“...the Life was the Light of men.”*** The author presupposes that without light men lived in darkness. Darkness is to be overcome. Light is more powerful and better than darkness. John the Baptist ***“was not***

the light, but came only as a witness to the light". This light, shining in darkness, was a self-disclosing act of God. In the Old Testament the Law was often regarded as the bringer of light (Psalm 119 vv 105 and 130).

With the coming of light the darkness is uncovered (chapter 9 v 39). Light acts as a judgement on the darkness, on evil and the evidence of evil in the world. Some people refuse to be enlightened by the light of life – *"...they loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil"*. At the Feast of Tabernacles (chapter 7) light was a singular characteristic. In chapter 8 verse 12 Jesus makes another shattering claim – *"I am the light of the world"*. The whole of chapter 9 is concerned with a sign (the healing of the blind man) and a discourse about light.

Jesus anointed the eyes of this blind man with clay formed from moistened dust (cf. Genesis 2 v 7). The man then had to believe and obey. By going to the pool he showed both faith and obedience. The result was that he returned seeing. Jesus had brought light but men preferred darkness rather than light and so the great dispute began. Notice the skill of John as a story teller. We can hear the frustration of the enemies of Jesus and the ironic mocking of the former beggar. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, the man in this story thought Jesus was a prophet (chapter 9 v 17). He came to a greater understanding as the Light penetrated his mind. Sadly the Pharisees, or some of them, chose not to see (chapter 9 v 16); for them strict adherence to the law was paramount. They had failed to remember that Exodus chapter 20 v 2 emphasised the Law was given through the grace of God. Beware! By contrast the blind beggar knew the illumination of faith.

As ever, those who have the light of Christ within them face opposition. This is still true in our day. There were serious consequences for the man in the story in that fiercely religious culture. It meant a far-reaching reduction of social as well of religious life. In common understanding it meant a loss of standing, even with God. After Jesus met the man again, he made a full confession of faith, *"Lord, I believe"* (chapter 9 v 38). Such an experience mirrors the pattern of all who find Jesus to be the Light of the World.

The story shows the divisions which the coming of Jesus produces, both spiritually and socially.

In his first epistle John wrote, *"God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all"* (chapter 1 v 5). Jesus affirmed, *"I am the Light of the World"*: Christians have the privilege of grace to declare, *"One thing I do know, I was blind but now I see"* (chapter 9 v 25).

Witness

Jesus made some incredible claims in the course of His ministry and His contemporaries challenged Him to prove the truth of what He said. In the prologue we are introduced to the first witness, John the Baptist. He pointed to Jesus as the light and firmly denied that he himself was any more than "the preparer" (chapter 1 vv 15 – 28). John was a lamp;

Jesus was the Light. The Baptist is emphatic that it is his role to point to the One Who was “before me” both in time and in importance.(chapters 1 vv 16 – 17, 3 vv 27 – 30).

The author refers to at least six more witnesses who bear testimony to truth the God disclosed Himself in the Word made flesh.

1. The Father Himself (chapters 1 vv 36 – 40, 5 v 37, 8 v 18). Those who believe know without doubt that Jesus is God’s Son for God Himself confirms it in their hearts (1 John 5 vv 9 – 10)
2. The Holy Spirit (chapters 14 v 26 and 15 v 26). His witness continues throughout time in the lives of Christians.
3. The works of Jesus (chapters 10 v 25, 37, 38 and 14 v 11 among other references in the Gospel). These works have never finished but continue in saving, renewing, healing, comforting, directing and inspiring all who come to God by Jesus.
4. The Scriptures (chapters 1 v 45 and 5 v 49). It is not the Scriptures as such or even enormous knowledge of them which will give eternal life: the Son alone gives life but it is in the Scriptures that we meet Him. We need to obey God’s written word, not defend it. C.H.Spurgeon, “Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion!”.
5. Various individuals: the woman of Samaria (chapter 4 v 39), Peter (chapter 6 v 38), Martha (chapter 11 v 27), citizens of Bethany (chapter 12 v 17) and others.
6. The author of the Gospel (chapters 19 v 35 and 21 v 24).

World

John uses the word “world” to mean more than one thing.

1. The created world (chapter 11 v 9). Jesus speaks about being with His Father before the world began, i.e. before creation itself (chapter 17 v 5). In chapter 21 verse 25, the created world in its entirety is too small to hold the record of Jesus’ life.
2. The lower world (chapters 8 v23 and 14 v 27), but such a world cannot give peace (chapter 16 v 33).
3. The other world (chapter 18 v 36). Jesus reaffirms that His kingdom is from a different place.
4. The world of men. Most often John refers to the world of men and frequently the implication is that the world of men rejects and actually hates Jesus. The great paradox is that God loves the world and Jesus came to save it! (chapter 3 vv 16 and 17). The prologue also makes this clear (chapter 1 vv 10 and 11). The consequence is that the rejection of Jesus will continue for His disciples: they too can expect hatred and opposition. Tragically, opposition to Jesus is opposition to God (chapter 15 v 23). In His prayer for His disciples in chapter 17 Jesus prays for the faith of His disciples and know that the world will not weaken it. The world hates Jesus, His message and His disciples because by His teaching He judges the world of men. But God’s response, not just for Jews but for the whole world, is to offer salvation from sin (chapters 1 v 29, 6 vv 33 and 35).

Glory

Glory is a difficult concept to reduce to words; too great a concept for us to take in. In John's Gospel it includes all the revelations of divine majesty and power. God's glory is not only a characteristic of His nature: it is also His acts. In the Old Testament we read of the Shekinah Presence of God among His people (Exodus 24 v 45), in His sanctuary (Exodus 25 v 8), in miracles (Numbers 14 v 22), in the giving of the Law (Deuteronomy 5 v 24) and in the experience of men privileged to "see" God in visions e.g. Moses (Exodus 33 vv 18 and 22), Isaiah (chapter 6 v1), Ezekiel (chapter 1)

The fourth Gospel proclaims that by the coming of Jesus God has shown His glory in a new way. John claims absolute uniqueness for Jesus: no other human incorporates in his nature all the transcendent glory of God. The glory includes ideas of light and encompasses holiness, power, goodness, wisdom and love.

There are many incidents which show Jesus and His ministry being primarily concerned to bring glory to God the Father, e.g. chapters 2 v 11, 8 v 54, 11 vv 40 – 42. A wonderful promise is given to His followers in chapter 15 v 8. When Jesus is praying in the shadow of Calvary, His deepest desire is to glorify the Father (chapter 17 vv 1 –5).

It is out of love for the world that the Father sent the Son, the Son laid down His life that the love of the Father, a feature of His glory, might be fully known.

Truth

In our language the word truth usually means the opposite of what is false. It often has a scientific colouring to its meaning. A statement is made, evidence is produced and the statement is upheld as correct. Our world has usually accepted that use of the word. Occasionally, and often in poetry, truth is understood as an embodiment of something deeper than the opposite of falsehood, for example, Keats "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" or the hymn writer, "Truth in its beauty..."

In his Gospel John uses the word in both senses. With the Samaritan woman "What you have just said (about your husband) is quite true (chapter 4 v 18) but when he records the events of the crucifixion the writer says, "The man who saw it tells the truth" (chapter 19 v 35).

Most famously in chapter 14 v 6 Jesus says, "***I am the Way, the Truth, the Life***". By saying "***I am the truth***" He shows that the truth has become flesh. He is the embodiment of the indestructible, ever living God. This is almost impossible to understand, but we have the amazing promise that "***the Spirit will lead us into all truth***" (chapter 16 v 13). What a concept! The understanding of the believer will be opened to recognise and acknowledge the nature of God. Pilate did not wait for an answer to his own question, "What is truth?" (chapter 18 v 38). Tragically he failed to realise that absolute truth was standing before him. Has anything changed?

John identifies truth to authenticate his intentions in writing his Gospel.

Chapter 1 v 9	true light – authentic light
Chapter 4 v 23	true worshippers – in spirit and in truth
Chapter 6 v 32	true bread from heaven – maintains and feeds
Chapter 8 v 32	truth will set you free – free from sin and its consequences
Chapter 15 vv 1 – 8	true vine – indwelling truth.

Truth, of course, can be disbelieved. However, for those who do believe there is affirmation from God (chapter 3 v 21)

Conclusion

We have thought about the themes of the Gospel which John introduced in the Prologue; Life, Light and Darkness, Witness, World, Glory and Truth. Like the overture to an opera the themes are developed as the story unfolds. The fourth Gospel is so much more than the skilfully written classical literature which, undoubtedly, it is. It is the tool by which all who read it might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing may have life in His name (chapter 20 v 31)

Reference material;

<i>Donald Guthrie,</i>	<i>St John in New Bible Commentary, IVP</i>	
<i>Robin E Nixon</i>	<i>St John in Bible Study books</i>	<i>Scripture Union</i>
<i>R.V.G.Tasker</i>	<i>John</i>	<i>Tyndale Press</i>
<i>E. V. Rieu</i>	<i>The Four Gospels</i>	<i>Penguin Classics</i>
<i>John Marsh</i>	<i>St. John</i>	<i>Pelican N. T. Commentaries</i>
<i>John Stott</i>	<i>The Message of John</i>	<i>The Bible speaks Today, IVP</i>