

Overview of John's Gospel

I. Canonization & Acceptance

- A. Synoptic: from Greek συνοπτικός (*synoptikos*) “seeing together”
 - 1. Matthew, Mark, Luke: Jesus' story in roughly the same order of events, similar point of view
 - 2. John is an awkward fit alongside these three
 - a. unique stories, unique characters
 - b. even shared stories are in a different order, told differently
- A. Early esteem of John among various heterodox sects (gnostics); Heracleon's commentary ca. 180 C.E.
- B. “Is it OK to have such a different picture of Jesus in the canon?”
 - 1. Marcion's canon, only one gospel (2nd century C.E.)
 - 2. Tatian's *Diatessaron* (harmonization of gospels, 2nd century C.E.)
 - 3. The concept of John as a “spiritual” gospel—Clement of Alexandria, 3rd century

II. Authorship

- A. Traditional attribution: John, son of Zebedee
 - 1. Irenaus, 2nd century C.E.
 - 2. The Church Fathers strongly linked *authority* with *apostolic authorship*
- B. Intra-textual attribution: The Beloved Disciple (21:24), an eyewitness (19:35)
 - 1. As a specific disciple? As a symbol for the Johannine church? As the sect founder?
- C. The Johannine community
 - 1. Indications of gradual composition (gaps, inconsistencies, multiple endings)
 - 2. Event / Reflection pattern: episodes are not bare accounts, but followed by elaboration
 - 2. intra-textual justifications of continued composition / multiple accounts:
 - a. The Spirit will continue to reveal the truth to the believing community (16:7-15; 15:26; 14:15-17)
 - b. “The world could not contain” enough books to record everything Jesus did (21:25; cf. 20:30)

III. Some features of John's gospel:

- A. High Christology (theology of who Jesus is)
 - 1. Wisdom: Jesus resonates with “Sophia” (personified Wisdom as seen in Jewish scriptures)
 - 2. Jesus is God: Jesus uses the divine “I AM,” as God did from the burning bush with Moses
 - 3. Pre-existent Christ exists with God, descends to earth, is glorified at his crucifixion
- B. Dualism: light/dark, sight/blindness, life/death, spirit/flesh, from above / the world
 - 1. “Children of God” (1:12) vs. the *extremely* harsh assessment of those who reject Jesus (8:44)
 - a. who are often (but I would argue, not consistently) identified as the *Ioudaioi*, “the Jews”
- C. Irony / puns / misunderstanding. The “surface level” is never the entire picture!
- D. Realized eschatology (“last things”): the believer enters eternal life *now*, in this world; less future oriented.
- E. Event/reflection pattern. Many miracles are followed by layers of homiletical reflection.
 - 1. Jesus' “deeds” (miracles) are “signs” which convey theological truths
 - 2. It is often hard to tell where the narrator takes over from Jesus' dialog!
- F. Two-level drama? Episodes have a “narrative level” (about Jesus' life), and an “ecclesiological level
- G. Ecclesiology (theology of the church)
 - 1. Continues to be led by the Spirit (“Advocate”), not authority figures; a diffuse pattern of authority?
 - 2. Less emphasis on the apostles (especially Peter) as leaders of the church
 - 3. Those in the church are “friends” of Christ, siblings (co-children of God), and are to serve one another in humility (e.g., footwashing, ch. 13) and love each other as Christ loved them
- H. Narrative structure is unique: Jesus goes to Jerusalem *multiple* times, structured around Festivals

IV. Rough Outline

- A. Prologue: 1:1–18
- B. The Book of Signs: 1:19—12
- C. The Book of Glory: 13—20
- D. An Epilogue: 21

The Prologue of John: 1:1—18

I. Beginning with a Hymn

- A. Rudolf Bultmann - the Prologue is like the musical overture of a symphony
- B. Alan Culpepper – the lens through which the rest of the gospel should be viewed
- C. Contrast Mark, who begins with Jesus' adulthood, or Matthew & Luke's infancy narratives
- D. Introduces themes which resonate throughout the rest of the gospel
 - 1. Including the stated purpose of the Gospel: compare 1:12 and 20:31
- E. Hymns are communal and doxological (about praising God); a celebratory beginning

II. Wisdom Traditions

- A. The “Word” (Greek, *logos*) – word, discourse, reason, plan
- B. the Prologue's “Logos” seems to share features of the figure of “Sophia” or “Lady Wisdom” from Jewish Wisdom literature
 - 1. Proverbs 8:1-36 “The Lord created me as the beginning of his works, before his deeds of long ago...”
 - 2. Proverbs 9:1-6 “Wisdom has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine, and also set her table...”
 - 3. Proverbs 1:20-33 “I called but you refused to listen, no one paid attention...”
 - 4. Proverbs 3:13-18 “By Wisdom the Lord laid the foundation of the earth...”
 - 5. Sirach 24:1-22 “Before the ages, in the beginning, he established me...” “Make your tent in Jacob”
 - 6. Wis. 7:21-8:1 “Wisdom, the fashioner of all things...”
- C. Shared characteristics: was in the beginning, is with God, active in process of creation, pursues humanity, invites humanity to the “banquet” of Wisdom, rejected by many, reconciles those who accept her to God

III. Other Very Early Christ Hymns

- A. Examples:
 - 1. Phil. 2:6-11 “Christ existed in the form of God, but emptied himself and took on the form of slave...”
 - 2. Hebrews 1:2-4 “Through whom God created the world... the Son is the radiance of God's glory...”
 - 3. Colossians 1:15-20 “He is the image of the invisible God... all things were created through him...”
- B. Common themes:
 - 1. Christ existed from the beginning
 - 2. Christ participates in the process of creation
 - 3. Christ descended to earth
 - 4. Christ is finally exalted by God

IV. Features of the Hymnic Prologue

- A. Voice – poetic voice is corporate (note the “we”) and authoritative, omniscience in perspective
- B. Panoramic View – encompasses “the beginning” and the present, heaven and the world
- C. The rhythmic lines are interpolated with prosaic interruptions about John the baptist or other details
- D. Summarizes the Gospel of John in miniature, including the main conflict – rejection of Jesus (1:10-12)
- E. Several times emphasizes the Word's role in the World's creation
 - 1. “All things came into being through him” (1:3a) / “The world came into being through him” (1:10)
 - 2. “Without him not one thing came to be” (1:3b)
 - 3. The world is “his own” (*τὰ ἴδια*) – (1:11)
 - 4. His life is the light of all people (1:3c)
- F. Implies the basic goodness of the created order (Greek “*cosmos*” or “world”) and Christ's ongoing creative involvement in it