The Gospel of John

“The glory of God is not that of a despotic tyrant, but the splendor of love before which we fall not in abject terror but lost in wonder, love and praise.”

- William Barclay, The Gospel of John

The Fourth Gospel: A Different Approach

The gospel of John is dramatically different than the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Instead of organizing the gospel using historical events, John presents Jesus in all of his theological grandeur. He gives us fewer stories than the other gospels, but those he does present are rich with detail. Scenes in John that are not in the synoptics include the wedding feast at Cana, the discussion with Nicodemus, the conversation with the woman at the well, the raising of Lazarus.

John begins with a poetic prologue (1:1-18) that many have dubbed the "overture" to the whole work. Here John is taking Jesus and uniting him with the eternal Father that we met in the opening verses of Genesis. Jesus is the Word, the fullness of revelation, nothing else can be said. From chapters one to twelve (The book of Signs) the narrative crescendos to the climax of the Last Supper, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus in Ch. 13-20 (The Book of Glory). Chapter 21 is like an addendum, or perhaps an epilogue, in that it seems like an add-on to the Gospel as it shows the disciples having breakfast with Jesus after the resurrection.

John uses rich symbolism throughout his Gospel. Images like bread, light, sheep, and water to provide rich theological meaning that is rooted in the Old Testament and brought forth sacramentally for Christians. John presents no parables and relatively few stories of healings. Instead, Jesus gives several long discourses which are teeming with theological content. (Woman at the Well, Bread of Life, John 15-17)

Author Source Point of View: The Beloved Disciple

John’s gospel was the last to be written and is generally considered to be written in the late 90s of the first century. In the Gospel of John, John never refers to himself as John rather he refers to himself as the “beloved disciple.” It was not for until the late second century when it was generally accepted that the Beloved Disciple was in fact John, the Son of Zebedee. John therefore is the younger brother of James and is generally considered to be the youngest of the 12 apostles, following our Lord. In the synoptics gospels John and his brother James are referred to as the Sons of Thunder, in that they were probably the rowdy sons of the owner of Zebedee Fishing Co. After Jesus’ calling John is painted to have become rather docile. Being part of the Jesus inner-three (Peter, James, and John), he has a unique perspective of Jesus and John’s relationship with Jesus is just as unique as Jesus’ relationship with Peter.

The Jesus-John friendship is very apparent in this gospel, the poetic tone is reminiscent of an old man writing down the events about his best friend dying after decades of prayer and reflection. Jesus’ personality is different in John’s gospel and at times even seems a little snarky. Jesus is always in charge and his divinity always affirmed and never in doubt.

John, therefore has firsthand knowledge of Jesus and most likely has read the other three gospels. Unlike the synoptic gospels John’s target audience are already converted Christians. John, therefore, is trying to convey a spiritual depth in Jesus that is not present in the other gospels. John’s readers already believe that Jesus is God and he is trying to show that one can have an intimate relationship with Jesus and they too can considered ‘beloved disciples.’ John’s gospel is one of the best examples that scripture is not a self-help book, or a simply a code of conduct, it’s about a spiritual connection with God. John’s mission statement is perhaps best summarized by John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”
Two Books - One Gospel: The Book of Signs and the Book of Glory

John chapters 1-12 are often referred to as the Book of Signs and presents seven signs to show Jesus' divinity. John avoids telling us the same stories that we have heard over and over again in the other gospels. Instead he uses a different approach to build up the greatest sign of our healing/redemption: The Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Thus these seven signs precede and foreshadow the great "8th Sign" of Jesus' death and resurrection which happens at the end of the Gospel.

A major theme in the Gospel of John is that Jesus’ power in the signs still touches us to this day through the sacraments. The sacraments our are bridge back to Jesus ministry. John tells the stories of Jesus’ life in such a way that we can see that the sacraments were already present in what Jesus was doing, and his ministry continues through the sacraments.

The high-Christology of John’s Gospel center’s around these signs.
1. Changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11); (Marriage)
2. Healing the royal official’s son (Jn 4:46-54);
3. Healing the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (Jn 5:1-15);
4. Feeding the 5,000 (Jn 6:5-14);
5. Walking on water (Jn 6:16-21);
6. Healing the man born blind (Jn 9:1-7);
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11:1-45).

The Book of Glory starts in chapter 13 and concludes with Jesus resurrection in chapter 20 & 21. Here John begins the process of showing the fullness of who Jesus is, he is to be shown in the light of supreme glory. The chapters 13-16 are his farewell discourse to his disciples which set in place who he is and what is wants us who follow him to do. Chapter 17 is referred as Christ’s High Priestly Prayer that sets up his eternal offering that occurs in chapters 18 & 19 of his passion and death. His glory is fulfilled in his resurrection in Chapter 20 and Chapter 21 serves as an epilogue to the entirety of the gospels.

Outline of The Gospel of John

1 - Prologue (Logos Hymn); The Witness of John (the Baptist); The First Disciples of Jesus
2 - The Wedding Feast at Cana; Jesus' First Passover in Jerusalem: The Incident in the Temple
3 - Jesus' Conversation with Nicodemus; John (Baptist)'s testimony
4 - The Samaritan Woman at the Well; Healing of a Royal Official's Son
5 - The Sabbath Healing of a Sick Man at the Bethzatha Pool in Jerusalem; Ensuing Controversy
6 - The Second Passover in Galilee: Feeding of 5000; Walking on Water; Bread of Life Discourse
7 - The Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem; Jesus Teaches in the Temple; Diverse Reactions to Jesus
8 - [Adulterous Woman 7:53—8:11]; Jesus as "Light of the World"; Truth; Origin & Identity of Jesus
9 - The Sabbath Healing of a Man Born Blind near the Pool of Siloam; Ensuing Controversy
10 - The Good Shepherd Discourse; Feast of Dedication; Jesus Retreats across the Jordan
11 - The Raising of Lazarus at Bethany; Final Plot against Jesus; Jesus Retreats to Ephraim
12 - The Third Passover in Judea; Anointing at Bethany; Final Entry into Jerusalem; "the Hour"
13 - The Last Supper: Washing of Disciples' Feet; Foretelling of Judas' Betrayal & Peter's Denial
14 - The Farewell Discourse (Part I), incl. Fear Not, Paraclete, Peace
15 - The Farewell Discourse (Part II), incl. Vine & Branches, Love & Hate, Paraclete
16 - The Farewell Discourse (Part II - cont.), incl. Persecutions, Paraclete, Joy, Prayer, etc.
17 - The Great Prayer of Jesus
18 - The Passion Narrative: incl. Arrest in Garden, Meeting in Annas' House, Peter's Denial, Jesus' Trial before Pilate
19 - The Passion Narrative (cont.): Trial continues, Crucifixion, Death, Burial
20 - The Empty Tomb; the Risen Lord appears to Mary Magdalene, to the Disciples, to Thomas; First Conclusion
21 - Epilogue: Breakfast Appearance by Sea of Tiberias; Peter's Love & the Beloved Disciple; Second Conclusion

Fall 2020 Lecture Series: Sacred Scripture