



# The Four Gospels

## Part Four Johns Gospel

Johns Gospel presents us with a Jesus that is strikingly different from the synoptic Gospels. The prologue itself gives us a clear indication of the very nature of Jesus which, could be argued, is at odds with the Gospels of Mathew, Mark, and Luke. In Johns Gospel Jesus is more self-assured, confident of where his ministry and teaching is taking him, explicit in who he is, and leaves us in no doubt about his relationship with the Father God in heaven. It will be helpful therefore to highlight the various themes that run through the Gospel

### ***The Prologue***

In Marks Gospel There is no birth narrative. That theme doesn't get developed until we read the Gospels of Matthew and Luke who probably wrote in and around the 80's. John who wrote towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century now presents Jesus as pre-existing being who lived beyond the creation of time itself! *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning (John1:1)* Johns Theology is so far advanced that it doesn't seem compatible with the teaching of Matthew and Luke who presented Jesus as a child born into

an earthly existence! Jesus is the *word (Logos in Greek)* and the word was with God and is God! This again is a powerful statement, Gods word is full of life and power, a theme that we find in the psalms! *God sent forth his word and healed them (psalm 107: 20)*

John may be referring to Isaiah as well when he talks of Jesus being rejected by the world. compare the following;

*but Israel does not know, my people do not understand with, he was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. (Isaiah 1:3)*

*He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1: 10.)*

Although Jesus came into the world and the world rejected him he is presented as God's word to all people and his association is with both creation and redemption!

### ***Christology***

Johns Gospel is the only gospel that is explicit in its proclamation that Jesus is divine. In Marks Gospel Jesus tells people to be quiet about his healing and often refers to God rather than himself, pointing the way towards his Father in Heaven, for instance...

*People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the*

*kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*

*As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.”*

But in John's Gospel Jesus is explicit in his proclamation that he is God!

*“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8: 58)*

this is a clear reference to the way in which God spoke in many Old Testament passages *I am Yahweh (Exodus 3: 14)*. In the Old Testament God reveals himself through the words “I am!” a reference to himself. It is no wonder that the Jewish Authorities picked up stones to stone Jesus, his claim would have been blasphemous and worthy of death.

Jesus' divinity comes across so strongly in John's Gospel that it has been suggested by some scholars to “tip the balance” of being both Man and God in favour of Jesus' divinity!

Most striking of all is the death of Jesus in John!

Marks Gospel	Johns Gospel
<p data-bbox="109 185 520 312">Jesus suffers intently, in Gethsemane he is in agony (14:33)</p> <p data-bbox="109 691 445 770">His Disciples run away (14:34-52)</p> <p data-bbox="109 962 537 1185">Eventually Jesus dies in apparent despair crying: “My God My God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34)</p>	<p data-bbox="571 185 1005 663">Jesus seems in total control: When soldiers come to arrest him, he asks them who they are looking for. They reply “Jesus of Nazareth” Jesus then replies “I am he” and the arresting party fall to the ground! - as one might when confronted with the divine “I am” (18:1-16)</p> <p data-bbox="571 679 1005 850">The Jesus continues to control the situation, telling the guards to let disciples go (18:7-8)</p> <p data-bbox="571 951 1005 1217">At his trial Jesus is seen to be king with even more authority than the Roman governor Pilate. When Jesus dies he emits a cry of Victory, “it is finished”</p>

This concept of Jesus divinity has led some scholars to question whether Jesus was really human at all! They make reference to “Docetism” the second century heresy which asserted that Jesus only appeared human. These ideas were developed in E. Kasemanns book *The Testament of Jesus*<sup>i</sup>

However, although it is certainly true that the Christology is exceptionally high in John, we should also note the very human nature of Jesus, for instance

- The key statement in the prologue where John announces that “the word became flesh”
- Jesus displays normal human attributes (tiredness, frustration, anger, crying, becoming thirsty)
- Jesus is still troubled at the thought of death (12:27)
- Although Jesus is victorious at the cross when he is “lifted up” he still has to endure a real crucifixion in which he experiences the full range of agony and death itself!

Although Jesus makes references to his divinity throughout the Gospel his humanity is also an important aspect of who he is. John therefore presents us with a Jesus who is both “fully human and fully divine”

### ***Judgment and Eternal life***

Two themes that are in stark contrast to the synoptic Gospels are judgment and eternal life. In the synoptic gospels the emphasis is on the installation of the kingdom,

but John only mentions the kingdom twice in his Gospel. Instead, John's emphasis is in obtaining eternal life.

The concept of eternal life is often tied up with other themes such as judgment and eschatology, that has led some scholars, notably C.H. DODD and Rudolph Bultmann, to emphasize something called "Realised Eschatology" the belief that Judgment and eternal life take place in the present when Jesus is revealed to us. Consider the following passage in John taking note of the highlighted areas

*Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life.*

*'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. <sup>26</sup> For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; <sup>27</sup> and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup> Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice <sup>29</sup> and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

*'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.*

The idea of Judgment and eternal life taking place in the present is further developed the raising of Lazarus. In that story Jesus *calls Lazarus* out of death into *life* (11:43). It would be a mistake to assume that Lazarus is resurrected by Jesus, as it would be Jesus who will be the first fruits of the new creation!

*Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die (Ch 11: v 23)*

The raising of Lazarus is a powerful theological statement. In John, Jesus is saying *I can raise the dead and exercise judgment in the present moment*, as opposed to some final act of Judgment at the end of the age! This illustrates the developed theological position of the community for whom John was written, a subject we shall now turn to

### ***The Johannine community***

The most accepted view to date is that John wrote for a particular community in the late first century AD after Christians had been expelled from the synagogue by the Jewish authorities, an event that can be read in Mathews Gospel, *beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues (Matt 10: 17)*

The split from Judaism and the animosity that it created between Jews and Christians is thought to explain the following

- The often almost hostile way John speaks of Jesus opponents as “the Jews” even though Jesus himself is a Jew!
- The reference to the Jews putting followers of Jesus out of the Synagogue (9:22, 16:2)
- The rather inward emphasis on “loving one another” as opposed to everyone. This hints of a rather sectarian characteristic, a group who feels excluded by the others
- The high Christology. Jesus is a divine figure who came down from heaven in order to show why the Jews and others have failed to believe. This divine figure can only be understood through special divine revelation to a particular people (Christians) chosen by God!

The Johannine Church was a fractious community that argued and disagreed with itself, not unlike our established Church. These disputes can be read in the letters of John (1 John 2:18, 4: 1-3)

We can see references to this community throughout the Gospel. In Chapter 6: 68-69 Peter speaks for the reader, *Lord you have the words of eternal life, we have come to believe and know that you are the holy one of God*, similarly 1:14 **We** *have beheld his glory, glory as of his only Son the Father*

Perhaps the most striking example of the disputes between Christians and Jews is highlighted in the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. In 3:11 the conversation changes dramatically. Up until then Jesus and Nicodemus have been speaking as individuals, but suddenly the Author switches from singular to plural. We move to John's day and to a discussion between Christians and Jews **We** *(Christians) speak of what we know, and testify to what we have seen, but you (Jews) do not accept our testimony*. In chapters 5-9 there are repeated references between to the theological disputes between Christians and Jews

### ***Conclusion***

John's Gospel offers us a very different Gospel from those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. By the end of the first Century Theology within Christian communities had progressed which explains the very different nature of John to the synoptics. The Resurrection narrative in John presents us with a Jesus who can come and go at will and walk through doors even though they are locked! Certainly the divine nature of Jesus is clearly evident, but so to the humanity of Jesus as well! John's Gospel needs to be read with the understanding that the original readers would have been at

odds with the Jews, other Christian groups, and even the world itself. It was an early Church not unlike our own worldwide Church of today!

### **Bibliography**

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<sup>i</sup> E. Kasemanns book *The Testament of Jesus* London: SCM 1968 Philadelphia: Fortress



