

UNIT 2B: NEW TESTAMENT

44: The Gospel of St John

Contrast with the Synoptics

The Gospel of St John is in many ways a very different Gospel to those of the Synoptics. Whilst it agrees with the Synoptics in the fundamental importance of Christ's miracles and healing ministry, it should be noted that references to the kingdom of God, parables, proverbs, acts of deliverance and the Second Coming are all absent (except for the reference to the kingdom of God in 3:3,5). Our Lord in St. John's Gospel teaches through symbolic discourses which often refer to His relationship to the Father, and notable within these are the 'I AM' sayings. The discourses are based on a limited selection of miracles known as signs whereby the identity of Christ becomes clear. Some of these signs and discourses are distinctively Johannine, such as the miracle at Cana in Galilee, the healing of the man born blind, and the encounters between Jesus and Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is confessed as Messiah at the climax of His ministry, but in St. John's Gospel this is assumed from the outset (1:41-49), and the focus is rather on Jesus as the Son of God. Remarkably, it is only in the Gospel of St John that "a Jesus conscious of having pre-existed with God [the Father] before he came into the world" is stated explicitly in the High Priestly Prayer of John 17. There, verse 5 cites the words of Christ: "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was."¹ The power of this affirmation of Christ's divinity has been beautifully developed by St Hilary of Poitiers as applying to all of humanity—i.e. all of us:

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 364. While the Roman Catholic Father Brown's analysis is sound in the context of Christ affirming His pre-existence with the Father, there are numerous examples of Christ affirming His unity with the Father, beginning with the words of Jesus Christ to Joseph and Mary when they found Him in the Temple: "Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house? (Luke 2:49).

And so, [Christ] had not abdicated His own position. And yet, He had taken ours. He prays then, that the nature that He had assumed may be promoted to the glory that He had never renounced. . . . This Son, now incarnate, prayed that [human] flesh might be to the Father what the Son had been. He prayed that flesh, born in time, might receive the splendour of the everlasting glory, that the corruption of the flesh might be swallowed up, transformed into the power of God and incorruption of the [Holy] Spirit.²

The firmness of St John's affirmation of Christ's divinity and humanity in one person is often linked to the correct assumption that St John "was already engaged in battling heretical notions about Christ in his own time at the end of the first century."³

St John does not quote the Old Testament frequently; and of the eighteen Old Testament citations only five appear to have parallels in the other gospels. Whereas the Synoptics portray an extensive ministry in the area of Galilee and the north followed by a single and singular journey to Jerusalem for the Passion, in St John's Gospel there is an alternation between these locations. It is the Gospel of St John that enables us "to comprehend a two or three-year ministry for Jesus instead of the one year seemly indicated by the Synoptic Gospels;" however, it may well be that "the Synoptic accounts are scattered over the three-year ministry outlined in John."⁴

In the Johannine account, unlike the Synoptics, Jesus dies on the day of preparation before the Passover; and the trigger for his arrest seems to be the reaction to his raising of Lazarus from the dead, an unusual omission from the other gospels. The Anglican scholar, Father Paul Bradshaw proposes that "whether or not the Last

² St Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 3.16, quoted by Joel Elowsky (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, IVb*, on John 17:5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 235.

³ Joel Elowsky, Introduction to John," *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, IVa John 1-10* (Downers Grove: IL, InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. xxiii.

⁴ Joel Elowsky, "Introduction to John," *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, IVa John*, p. xx, with note 12.

Supper was a Passover meal has . . . been a topic of great debate;” however, “even if it were not a Passover meal, it still took place within a Passover atmosphere and context.”⁵ The important exegesis for Bradshaw and others is that “what did come to be generally accepted in the twentieth century . . . was that the ultimate roots of the Christian Eucharist lay in Jewish liturgical practice.”⁶ St John had already affirmed the importance of both our Lord’s baptism (1:19-36; 3:1-36) and the Eucharist in 6:51-59; and, as a note in *The Orthodox Study Bible* on 13:2 suggests, St John might have decided that “his hearers would have been familiar” with the specifics of both baptism and Eucharist, so “he focuses on the significance of these events.”

The Provenance of the Gospel

These differences between the Synoptics and St John’s Gospel point to a distinctive source of traditions in St John’s Gospel and place its composition in its final form sometime in the last quarter of the first century. Such a provenance, however, for this Gospel does not require an independent and radically different character for its teaching from that of the Synoptics. There are many points where St John’s Gospel connects with the traditions in St Mark’s and St Luke’s Gospels, and to a lesser extent with that of St Matthew. The work of St John the Baptist, the cleansing of the Temple, the feeding of the multitude, the walking on the sea, the request for a sign, St Peter’s confession, the anointing of Jesus, the entry into Jerusalem and the basic details of his passion and resurrection are all held in common. The combination of many details being held in common linked to occasional differences in details, chronology and interpretation between the Synoptics and St John’s Gospel is strong evidence of the presence of independent witnesses and personal experiences of Jesus Christ, with no possibility of collusion and superficial harmony.

⁵ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 2002), 2nd ed., pp. 63-65.

⁶ Bradshaw, p. 121. The Jewish Sabbath morning service in the synagogue, the Passover Meal and the grace before the Friday evening Jewish meal have all been proposed as possible antecedents of the Eucharist.

What then of the authorship of this Gospel? The answer to this question must be deferred for a moment until we have considered further the laying down of traditions within the final edited version. A single author working on his own seems unlikely, for in this Gospel we have problems of transition between texts and duplications which suggest several stages of editing by different people at different times. Chapters 15 to 17 seem to have been added on to previous natural endings at 14:31 and 20:30-31 respectively. In 21:24 the Beloved Disciple is referenced as a source for the Gospel witness, yet in the preceding verse it is implied that this man has already died, or at least the narrator is a different person. Some passages seem to have been added into an existing narrative at a later time (e.g. 3:31-36; 12:44-50) and this may apply to the prologue itself in chapter 1 which may derive from an early Christian hymn. With this editing of material in mind it is reasonable to suppose that whereas the Beloved Disciple, (whoever that might be in an otherwise anonymous gospel) is the primary source or witness to the Johannine traditions, others have contributed to the editing of the material to meet the needs of the Johannine community for which this Gospel was written. Bearing in mind these qualifications, who is this Beloved Disciple?

A minority of Christians early in the second century were suspicious of St John's Gospel both on account of its differences from the Synoptics and its popularity with Gnostic heretics. However, St Irenaeus of Lyons, that great scourge of heresy, stoutly defended the apostolicity of the Gospel based in part on a tradition current in Asia Minor at the time that the author was John, presumably the Apostle, writing in Ephesus. He knew that this John had lived until the time of Trajan, that is the beginning of the second century. This Eusebius corroborates. The latter confirms what we know today—that in fact St Irenaeus confuses two John's; the first the Apostle, the son of Zebedee ... the second, an otherwise unknown presbyter in Asia Minor also known as John. Eusebius also reports that in Ephesus there were two tombs bearing John's name. One of these he supposes to be that of the Christian

prophet named John who had written the Revelation / Apocalypse. However, the consensus in Tradition is that the Beloved Disciple *was* the apostolic writer of the Gospel; and that he died later on Patmos. However, we must concede that there was some early confusion concerning the identities and roles of these various ‘Johns.’ Nevertheless, by the end of the second century there was much more support for the idea that St John the Apostle / Theologian had indeed written the fourth Gospel, and that its apostolicity remained unimpeachable. The place in the canon of the Revelation took somewhat longer to establish, particularly in the east (see Lecture 45: The Johannine Writings). In the concluding paragraph of an extensive analysis of the Gospel of St John, Raymond Brown suggests sensibly: “Perhaps proportionately too much attention has been devoted to the background issues and too little to the Gospel’s helping readers to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and thus to possess life in [H]is name (20:31).”⁷

Finally, we have the question of the place and purpose of the writing of this Gospel. Part of the difficulty in answering that question is that the Gospel addresses universal themes and does not easily locate itself geographically. A Palestinian origin is likely insofar as there is an interest in the early mission to Samaria. Also allusive is the fact that although the Gospel does not quote the Old Testament directly, the patriarchal and Mosaic covenants are woven into the Christological fabric of the text through the use of typology, and this gives the Gospel a solid Hebraic foundation. In this regard, Jacob (4:5-6; 1:51) and Abraham (8:31-58) are referenced; and in chapter 6 the typology of manna is used in respect of Christ. The typology of the bronze serpent should also be noted in relation to the cross (3:14).

Jesus as prophet is very much seen in Mosaic terms. Of course, Judaism in the time of Christ was very diverse. There are traces of this in St John's Gospel particularly in contrasts made between light and darkness (1:5; 3:19-21; 8:12; 12:35-36, 46), truth and lies (8:44-45) and spirit and flesh (1:30; 3:6; 6:63). These all have close

⁷ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 378.

parallels in the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran. Moreover, as St John, his editors and the communities he founded moved out of a strictly Palestinian milieu the Hellenistic aspect of Judaism would have become more important; and this perhaps can be seen in the use of the prologue to establish a link between Christ as the (Hebraic use) Word made flesh and the Logos with which philosophically inclined Greeks would have been familiar.

The Structure and Theology of the Gospel of St John

The Gospel of St John is generally divided into an opening prologue (1:1-18), the Book of Signs in which “the Word reveals [H]imself to the world and to [H]is own, but they do not accept [H]im (1:19-12:50),” and the Book of Glory (13:1-20:31) in which “to those who accept [H]im, the Word shows [H]is glory by returning to the Father in death, resurrection, and ascension. Fully glorified, [H]e communicates the Spirit of life,” with a closing epilogue (21:1-25). In order to draw closer to the perspective of St John and his redactors, the Biblical template for this lecture will consider the opening lines of the prologue from the perspective of the Church Fathers.

The first and perhaps most striking aspect of St John's theology is a selection against the eschatological themes of this age and the age to come in favour of those teachings of Christ that emphasise the contrast between the temporal and the eternal. Life or eternal life is often seen as the present possession of the believer (3:36; 5:24; 6:47, 54; 17:3). Likewise, and apart from the isolated incidents of John 5:29, judgement is also seen as operative now (5:24; 12:31; 16:11). Whereas in the Synoptic gospels the glorification of Christ is seen as subsequent to his humiliation and death, in St John's Gospel it is the crucifixion itself which is the “hour” of his glorification (7:39; 12:23; 17:1) and the undoing of evil (cf. “the prince / ruler of this world” in 12:31; 14:30). This emphasis on the present realisation of salvation in Christ is often referred to as St John's “realised eschatology.” Again, unlike St

Luke who historicises the coming of the Spirit sometime after Pascha, St John locates this theologically as a direct consequence of the resurrection itself (20:21-23). This explains why St John in his Gospel shows little interest in the Second Coming of Christ, except in 5:29 where there is a straightforward reference to future judgement upon the resurrection of all flesh.

The realised eschatology of St John's Gospel is the context for the presentation of the contrasts between those things which are of God and those which are not of God to which we have already referred. This dualism of contrasts is not as it was with the Gnostics a cosmic antagonism between the good heavens and the evil Earth; the Judaeo-Christian tradition only knows a good creation made by a single and loving Creator. Rather, the Gospel presents these as choices between accepting Christ and rejecting Him. In chapter 17 this is extended to the disciples who will be accepted or rejected on account of their faith in Christ (v.14).

The Christology of John's Gospel has been heavily influenced by the consolidation of all aspects of the kingdom of God in the person of Christ himself. The many "I AM" sayings have a dual purpose in articulating this theology. First, they seek to reveal Christ in terms of the unutterable Divine Name; and then they express the meaning of that in universal salvific terms; for example: the way, truth, life, resurrection, bread, door, good Shepherd and the true Vine. Elsewhere, John the Baptist (alone) uses the title Messiah (1:41, 4:25), whereas others and St John use the title 'Son of God' (3:17; 19:7), the 'Logos' or Word Incarnate (1:14) and most notably St Thomas in John 20:28, ' my Lord and my God '.

Finally, there is the matter of the holy mysteries or sacraments in St John's Gospel. They appear to be absent! There is no narrative of the baptism of Christ or of the institution of the Last Supper, Protestant Biblical commentators have often concluded that the Gospel is not interested in the sacramental life, and yet nothing could be further from the truth. In the same way that the Old Testament is woven

into the very fabric of the Gospel itself, so are the sacraments. Baptism is referenced in Christ's encounter with Nicodemus and in the spiritual aspect of the washing of the feet and the Last Supper. The Eucharist is referenced at the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, the feeding of the multitude and the piercing of Christ's side with the spear after his death.

The Gospel St John does not attempt to give an exhaustive description of everything that Christ said and did, nor does it seek to make explicit everything that will be taken for granted in the life of the Church. The Gospel is a proclamation designed to bring people to a firm and explicit faith in Christ. (20:30-31). The reflection of Origen (c.185-c.254) has been confirmed by many others over many centuries:

None of the other Gospels manifested the divinity as fully as John when he presented him saying, 'I am the light of the world' (8:42), 'I am the way and the truth and the life' (14:6), 'I am the resurrection' (11:25), 'I am the door' (10:9), 'I am the good shepherd' (10:11). . . .⁸

In a similar vein of thought, St John Chrysostom, the 4th century Bishop of Constantinople, who studied theology under Diodore of Tarsus, the leader of the Antiochene School, commented:

While all the other Evangelists began with the incarnation . . . John, passing by everything else—his conception, his birth, his education, and his growth—speaks immediately on his eternal generation.⁹

As previously noted, this stress upon the divinity of Christ is matched in the Gospel of St John by an equally firm affirmation of the humanity of Christ. In "A Hymn for Christmas Day," Prudentius, a 4th century Latin poet and hymn writer, sang of John 1:3a about how "all things were made through Him":

⁸ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John 1:21-23*, quoted by Elowsky, IV a, p. 2.

⁹ St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 4.1*, quoted by Elowsky, IV a, p. 3.

Though you came from the mouth of God,
Born as his Word on earth below,
Yet as his Wisdom you lived
Forever in the Father's heart.

This Wisdom uttered made the sky,
The sky and light and all besides; [cf. Proverbs 8:28-30]
All by the Word's almighty power
Were fashioned, for the Word was God.

But when the universe was formed
And ordered by unchanging laws,
The Cause and architect divine
In the Father's bosom still remained. [cf. John 1:18]

Until the slow revolving years
In centuries at length had passed, [cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.748]
And he himself condescended to come
Down to the world grown old in sin. . . .

But such destruction of humankind
The heart of Christ could not endure;
And lest his Father's handiwork,
Unvindicated, should be lost,

He clothed himself in mortal flesh,
That by arising from the tomb
He might unlock the chains of death
And bring man to his Father's house.

This is your natal day, on which
The high Creator sent you forth,¹⁰
And gave to you a form of clay,
Uniting flesh with his own Word.¹¹

Amen. So be it!

¹⁰ The original Latin is *te spiravit*, literally, “breathed you forth.”

¹¹ Prudentius, “Hymns for Every Day 11, A Hymn for Christmas Day,” in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 43:78-80.

A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox biblical interpretation ought to have a three-level approach, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally:¹

John 1:1-3a: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was the beginning with God; all things were made through Him . . .”

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
Exegetical	Historical / Contextual <i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i>	<p>The Church Fathers have commented extensively on 1:1-3a, as evidenced by the first 21 pages of <i>Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Vol IV a</i> from whom these quotations are taken. Hillary of Poitiers’s exegesis is profound: “I will not endure to hear that Christ was born of Mary unless I also hear, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God” (1:1). St Cyril of Alexandria rightly reminds us: “It is not possible to take ‘beginning’ (<i>archē</i>) of the Only Begotten as being understood in any way dealing with time, seeing that the Son is before all time and has his being before the ages. . . .”</p>	<p>Of 1:1 St Augustine says: “This word is spoken in the heart, being neither Greek nor Latin nor any other language, [but] when we want to communicate to others, some sign [is necessary] to express it. . . Accordingly, the word that sounds externally is a sign of the word that lies hidden within. . . .” We can each find in faith how the Word is hidden within us and others.</p>
	Allegorical / Typological <i>(as derived from Tradition)</i>	<p>St John Chrysostom reflects on 1:1: “As when our ship is near shore, and cities and ports pass in view before us that on the open sea vanish and leave nothing to fix the eye on, so the Evangelist here takes us with him in his flight above the created world leaving the eye to gaze upon emptiness and an unlimited expanse . . .”</p>	<p>We are often like clipper ships who need to adjust our rudders to move in a new direction. When the rudder is first moved, the ship is still; and then the sails catch the wind, and the ship sails to “an unlimited expanse.”</p>
Interpretative	Spiritual / Ethical	<p>The Greek word <i>archē</i> is usually translated as “beginning,” but it can also mean “sovereignty” or “authority.” “It is this latter meaning of the word <i>archē</i> that Cyril is using. Thus the beginning of John’s Gospel is understood by Cyril as saying: ‘In the <i>Father</i> was the Word” p. 6n., that is, in St Cyril’s words: “It was</p>	<p>In our own lives, we share the freedom inherent in the Father and the Son. That freedom is rightly termed “free will” in the context of our personal experience of that divine freedom offered to us by</p>

		in the <i>archē</i> by nature as its co-eternal fruit, having the nature of Him who begot Him (as it were) the most ancient place of all. So then, He who is begotten free of a Father, who is also Himself free, will with Him possess the sovereignty over all. . .”	the unity of the Father and the Son. Through the Holy Spirit we learn how to live our lives in freedom, not in fear of God.
	Personal / Social	St Augustine insists that when it is written: “‘In the beginning was the Word,’ . . . we give expression to something that we know, the [human] word used is necessarily derived from the knowledge [we have] thus retained in the memory and must be of the same quality with that knowledge. For a word is a thought formed from a thing that we know. . .” ¹²	St Augustine’s insight continues with the text quoted above in the first Praxis. In other words, when the Word of God is spoken into each of our hearts, our own words can reach the unity of the Word of God in the Trinity.
Transformative	The Call to Holiness	“The Word” here is the Greek word <i>logos</i> . St Augustine points out “in Latin the Greek word <i>logos</i> signifies both ‘reason’ and ‘word.’ However, in this verse the better translation is ‘word,’ so that not only the relation [of the Son] to the Father is indicated but also the efficacious power with respect to those things that are made by the Word.” In other words, “the efficacious” power of God—the power of God to produce a result in the cosmos, the world, nations, local communities, our friends or ourselves—is certain. God has power because “all things were made through him” (1:3).	St Ambrose urges: “Let the soul that wishes to approach God raise itself from the body and cling always to the highest Good that is divine and lasts forever. . . . This is the divine Being ‘in which we live and are and move’(Acts 17:28).” The Trinity has been sent to each of us; and our appropriation of the Trinity calls us to holiness and can be transformative for us.
	The Call to Witness	The primary witness in 1:1-3a is St John describing the nature of Christ and His relationship to the Father and to “all things.” The 8th century hymn writer St Cosmas the Melodist says of Christ that: “The Father begot me, creative Wisdom, before the ages/ For though I am the	St Cosmas the Melodist is assuring us that Christ has taken our being and our voices—our words—into Himself. The key call to witness is in the final line—the assurance that

¹² In St Augustine’s thought, The Trinity is intelligible in so far as analogies can be drawn from human psychology, see here: - <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/trinity-history.html#Aug> From an Orthodox point of view such analogies are deficient because they proceed from an abstract notion of the divine unity, philosophically conceived, to the triple hypostases understood as mere analogies from human cognition and loving which are deemed to be “vestiges of the Trinity” in human life.

The Orthodox are more comfortable with the basic data of experience, namely the personal and existential encounters with and participation in both Christ and the Spirit, leading to the Father. Monotheistic conclusions can then be drawn concerning the one divine nature shared by all Three in this Unity. In this biblical grid the reader will note how this contrasting existential interpretation is represented in the teaching of the hymnographer, St Cosmas the Melodist. He explains how, due to the Incarnation, humans are now capable of participating directly in the intra-personal life of the Trinity. There are no analogies here!

		<p>uncreated Word by nature,/ I make my own the voice/ Of the nature I have now assumed./ . . Wherefore know that I am one Christ/ Who saves that of which and in which I am.”</p>	<p>Christ “saves that of which and in which I am.” Thus, if we believe in the Incarnation, we know that Christ calls us to participate in His life.</p>
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¹ In “*The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics,*” (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are: **1. Exegetical** - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine “the level of understanding of the biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality ...” (p. 190). **2. Interpretative** – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader’s contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197). **3. Transformative** – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages.

In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration. Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p. 115 f., Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the “literal” or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the inter-connectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.