

## *The Gospel According to John*

### **I. Introduction**

#### **A. Initial Considerations**

1. The first thing to note about the gospel records – including John’s – is that they are second and third person accounts of Jesus’ experiences, words and works. As far as we know, Jesus never recorded anything of His life or teaching, but entrusted His biography (oral and written) to His disciples. And not merely to their natural memories of Him, but to their recollection and understanding as informed and empowered by His Spirit (cf. John 14:16-26, 15:18-16:15; also Luke 24:44-53 with Acts 1:1-8).
2. Jesus left no written record and He also restricted His ministry and proclamation almost entirely to the Israelite people. The Father sent Him to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:21-24, 10:1-6), but not because of some unique concern for Jews over Gentiles, but to fulfill His long-standing promises to Israel which He initiated with the patriarchs and affirmed and enlarged through His prophets. Jesus was Israel’s promised Messiah and therefore the demonstration of God’s “righteousness” (His faithfulness concerning His word – Romans 3:21-22); He was the Son of Abraham and David in whom Yahweh would at last accomplish His pledge to return to Zion and destroy the enslaving power, liberate His captive people and cleanse and regather them to His restored habitation. In that way He would fulfill His covenant with David and establish forever his house, throne and kingdom (cf. Matthew 1:1-2:6; Luke 1:1-2:38).
3. Yahweh sent His Servant-Son to Israel, the Abrahamic covenant household, but in order that Israel would become Israel *indeed*. Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, but first in the sense that He *embodied* Israel in Himself as the Lord’s son, servant, disciple and witness (Isaiah 49:1ff). He was in truth what Israel was called to be but couldn’t satisfy; He was the True Israel, but for the sake of Israel. That is, Jesus embodied Israel in order that, by participating in Him, Israel would fulfill its own election and vocation and so uphold Yahweh’s covenant oath to the patriarchs: *Israel was His chosen instrument for accomplishing His restorative purpose for the whole world* (cf. Genesis 12:1-3 and 17:1-7 with 22:15-18, 26:1-5, 28:1-14). Thus the fate of the cursed creation, and not merely the human race, depended upon Israel being Israel indeed, and Israel was to attain to its authentic identity in its Messiah. This cosmic purpose having Israel at its center is the framework for Paul’s proclamation that the gospel – the good news of the in-breaking of Yahweh’s kingdom with the coming of His King – is to the Jew first and then to the Greek (Romans 1:16).
  - And so, while Jesus directed His ministry to the sons of Israel, He did so with a view to His larger mission to the world of men and the entire created order.
  - He had come into the world as Israel’s Messiah, but also as the Savior of mankind and the liberator of the captive creation; He was the King of Israel as David’s royal son, but also the Last Adam and the first-fruit of God’s new creation.

4. Jesus understood that His mission was cosmic as well as global and He hinted at it by His words and actions which reached beyond the children of Israel to the Gentiles and even the natural order (cf. Isaiah 11:1-12 with Matthew 5:1-5, 8:1-13, 15:21-28; Luke 13:22-30; John 4:1-38; cf. also Matthew 14:22-33 with Luke 8:22-25, Genesis 3:17-19 with Matthew 14:1-21, 15:29-38 and Genesis 2:15-17, 3:14-15, 20 with John 6:22-33). Jesus well discerned the nature and scope of His vocation and His disciples came to discern it when He poured out His Spirit upon them as He promised. Henceforth they were equipped to fulfill their own calling to be His witnesses and interpreters in the world and one critical component of that witness and interpretation was written accounts that would survive the apostolic generation and their verbal testimony. F. F. Bruce noted:

*“The perpetuation of the words and deeds of Jesus could not be entrusted indefinitely to oral tradition of this kind. Oral tradition might serve to preserve for many generations a body of teaching in rabbinical schools which were trained to receive and deliver it ‘without losing a drop.’ But the Christian tradition was not meant to be scholastic property: it was to be imparted to a wider public, and (from the rise of the Gentile mission) to a public whose culture was thoroughly literate. It was both desirable and inevitable that the oral tradition should be committed to writing if it was not to be lost.”*

5. Many such written accounts followed upon Jesus’ ascension and this raises the question of why the New Testament canon came to include only those attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Not surprisingly, the answer isn’t a simple one, but it may be adequately generalized in a few particulars:

- a. Because Jesus left no writings, the most obvious test of a document testifying to Him is its connection with one of His disciples. For, surely those who personally knew Him and whom He taught and commissioned were the best and most reliable witnesses to who He was and what He had said and done. The difficulty in the instance of the four New Testament gospels is that their ascriptions were later additions; none of these accounts initially carried the name of their author.

However, by the second century the accounts that now bear Matthew and John’s names were attributed to those two apostles (in John’s case, first by Irenaeus). (Ironically, later “gospels” – such as the Gospel of Thomas and Gospel of Peter – *did* carry the names of apostles, but their content showed them to be spurious.) As for Mark and Luke, early tradition also established their apostolicity:

- By the time of the church father Papias (c. 70-163 A.D.), it was widely accepted that John Mark, as a disciple of Peter, had put into writing Peter’s account of Jesus’ life, words and works.
- So also the account ascribed to Luke was early on associated with the physician Luke who had been Paul’s disciple and ministry companion (ref. Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 23-24). (Note that Luke’s gospel is the first part of his larger account which includes the book of Acts; ref. Luke 1:1-3 and Acts 1:1-2.)

- b. Another primary consideration in whether other accounts of Jesus' life (as well as other early Christian writings) should be included in the New Testament was their internal and external consistency. Anyone giving a serious reading to such a document could quickly spot any inconsistencies or contradictions and that would be sufficient to reject it as not scriptural (i.e., not informed by the Spirit's leading). Similarly, an account of Jesus' life and work would be rejected if it differed from the apostolic testimony first provided by the apostles themselves and then by those to whom they passed along and entrusted their message.

*“When previously unknown Gospels or Acts began to circulate under the authority of apostolic names, the most important question to ask about any one of them was: What does it teach about the person and work of Christ? Does it maintain the apostolic witness to him as the historical Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead, divinely exalted as Lord over all?”* (Bruce)

- c. Many of the earliest Church fathers referred to various “gospel” accounts (accounts of Jesus' life and work), but it was Tatian (c. 120-185 A.D.) who formalized the notion of a four-fold gospel with his *Diatessaron* (literally, a “harmony of four”). Tatian composed this document around 170 A.D. as one continuous gospel narrative, but a narrative which collated the four accounts ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. (Tatian collated the material in chronological order as it appeared to him). The *Diatessaron* served as the standard form of the four gospel accounts in the Syrian churches until the fifth-century.
6. Most scholars believe that John's gospel was the last of the four to be written. (It is commonly dated near the end of the first century.) What is beyond dispute is that his gospel took the longest to receive universal acceptance in the Christian churches. Many reasons have been cited, but Bruce is likely correct that many Christian communities held John's gospel suspect because of the affinity the emerging Gnostic movement had for it.
7. Its late date distinguishes John's gospel from the other three, but the primary point of distinction resides elsewhere: Whereas the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke strongly correspond to one another, John's has a unique perspective and orientation and contains much material that isn't found in the other gospels. (The general agreement of Matthew, Mark and Luke in their subject matter, language and structure is the reason they are dubbed *synoptic* – “seeing together” – gospels.)

This is not to say that John's account in any way contradicts or negates those of his counterparts; his gospel doesn't contradict them, but *complements* them. John recorded situations, events and discussions that the other three evangelists either omitted or didn't treat in any depth. The Upper Room event preceding Jesus' arrest is a good example (cf. John 13-17 with Matthew 26:17-29, Mark 14:12-25 and Luke 22:1-38). Conversely, the synoptic writers included material that John omitted, for instance Peter's declaration of Jesus' messiahship (ref. Matthew 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21). Obviously, the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke also differ from one another (sometimes one or two of them parallel John's record), but not to the extent that they differ from John.

8. John's gospel is that of an eyewitness to Jesus' life and ministry (cf. 19:31-35, 21:24-25). This suggests that it was written by one of the Twelve. And assuming that the gospels attributed to Matthew and Mark were penned by those individuals (John Mark recording Peter's account), all three represent the testimony of apostolic eyewitnesses. So also Luke's gospel, although a third party account, was written by a man who performed his own research carefully and thoroughly (Luke 1:1ff), which would have involved eyewitness interviews. Thus all four gospels reflect eyewitness testimony, which further highlights that their differences should be viewed as a matter of perspective, intent and emphasis. Indeed, if such differences didn't exist, the authenticity of their writings would be highly suspect; even where witnesses have the same frame of reference and goal in their testimony, their accounts will differ simply because they are different human beings.

So John constructed his gospel according to a conscious purpose. Like his counterparts, he set out to record the "Christ event," but with a specific design in mind. His intention determined His vantage point and emphases, but also the material he recorded and the way he arranged it. Two of John's primary emphases are worth noting here:

- 1) The first is also the most obvious, which is John's treatment of Jesus' existence as the Logos prior to the incarnation (1:1-2). While Matthew and Luke looked backward from Jesus' birth by treating it as a matter of prophetic fulfillment, their introduction of Jesus Himself began with his conception in Mary's womb. For His part, Mark introduced Jesus as a grown man embarking on His public ministry.
- 2) Compared to the synoptic gospels, John's account also gives greater emphasis to Jesus' intimate interactions and conversations. (Matthew has long discourses, but of a more didactic quality.) The Upper Room event is an excellent case in point: John dedicated five chapters to it whereas his counterparts covered the same episode in several verses. Scholars propose different reasons for this, but clearly John structured his presentation to substantiate his claims concerning Jesus. *And at the heart of those claims is his contention that Jesus is the incarnate God – the God, not just of Israel, but of the whole world.* He is Yahweh become flesh: Yahweh returned to His people in order to end Israel's exile and so fulfill His restorative purpose for the world through Israel (cf. 1:1-18, 3:13-17, 12:31-32).

Jesus is the incarnation of the God who is love and whose love moved Him to commit Himself to Adam's race and the creation Adam plunged into ruin. Jesus is thus both the *giver* and the *gift*: He is the One who is love and He is also the instrument and work of that love. The theme of the divine love is most pronounced in John's gospel, but more than that, *only John emphasized love as Jesus' core attribute and motive*: Matthew and Luke nowhere directly ascribed love to Jesus and Mark did so only once in relation to the rich young ruler (10:21). Indeed, many believe John was referring to Himself by the recurring expression, "the one whom Jesus *loved*." But love is about *relational intimacy*, and so it is eminently fitting that John should portray Jesus as vitally and deeply connected with men – in his heart as much as His words and deeds (cf. 11:3, 5, 36; cf. also 13:1 with 13:23, 34-35, 14:21, 15:1-13; ref. also 17:1-26).