

5. The Gospel of John

Conventionally dated to around 90-110CE and embodying a highly sophisticated theology, this text is unique among the canonical gospels.

It was written in good Greek and ascribed to the apostle John,¹ though it is unlikely to be the work of a simple fisherman and the anonymous author seems simply to identify himself with ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’, who is mentioned a number of times in the latter part of the text.

Certainly this gospel seems to have been written for the same community to which the three letters of John, as well as the Book of Revelation, were written, the location of this community being unknown.

This gospel is structured very differently from the synoptic texts,² and it is less concerned with Jewish tradition, focusing on Jesus as the eternal Word (*‘logos’* in Greek) of God who became flesh less to fulfil the Jewish Law than to *transcend* it.³ This viewpoint may stem from the conflicts between these early Christians and their Jewish counterparts, which led - for many - to their expulsion from the synagogues.⁴

The ‘Logos’ of God

John’s gospel begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹ As witnessed, for example, by Irenaeus in the 2nd century,

² the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke

³ cf. John 1:17

⁴ See, for example, 1 John 2:19 which appears to show a split between those who understood Jesus as uniquely God’s Son - and *logos* - and those who would not accept this, expelling these Christians from their synagogues

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.⁵

We need to be careful of over-familiarity with this text - it is easy to assume that we know it and its meaning - but this causes us to lose the *radical* nature of what is being said. This is Christian writing unlike any that had come before: it takes the Christian understanding of Jesus as uniquely Son of God (echoing the synoptic texts) and places it within a Greek philosophical - and, indeed, mythical⁶ - frame. This is wonderfully advanced and creative theology, beyond that contained in the other gospels and in the teaching of Paul and the other apostles.⁷

Notice how, almost immediately, key themes begin to emerge from the text: 'life', 'light', the contrast between light and darkness, and the unconquerable power of this light.

Notice also how the figure of the Baptist steps onto the scene against the background of the eternal:⁸ he is *witness* to the eternal Word.

Notice how the focus then returns to the Word, telling us that some have acknowledged Him and others have not⁹ - and how, only then, do we read, 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, *and we have seen his glory*'.¹⁰ We are *led along a path* from God's eternity to the human person of Jesus who **lived among us** and who was seen, acknowledged and **touched**.¹¹ The message is clear, as Jesus says to Thomas: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'¹²

⁵ John 1:1-18

⁶ 'Mythical' does not mean untrue: understood truly, myths contain deep truths about humanity and our understanding of our own meaning

⁷ as evidenced in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul, as well as other New Testament literature

⁸ Of the Word, alive with and in God from eternity

⁹ This theme is played out throughout the gospel which follows

¹⁰ John 1:14

¹¹ even by Thomas after Jesus had risen from death: John 20:24-29

¹² John 20:29

Exercise: Slowly read this passage again - let it sink in and allow yourself to sit with anything that you notice. What images come to your mind? Which phrases stand out for you?

Jesus: God and Man

Unlike the synoptics, the gospel of John - early in the account - tells of an encounter between Jesus and a woman who was not Jewish:

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptising more disciples than John' — although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptised— he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman

said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'¹³

We are presented with a long text - a story not recounted by any of the synoptic authors: what are we to make of it?

The source is unknown and is the subject of much debate yet, perhaps, reflects oral or written sources which are now lost.¹⁴ It seems unlikely that the story could be remembered in such detail decades after the event: the conversational details are too precise and, as the text itself mentions, none of the disciples were present to witness it (they were all away fetching food).

But also - it is important to note - the author is structuring his gospel very precisely to convey a message: following seven signs given by Jesus, there are seven 'I am' discourses, followed by a 'passion source' for the account of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Whilst the author seems to have been aware of Mark and Luke - he uses phrases common to them - yet his gospel account does not follow theirs in structure.

¹³ John 4:1-42

¹⁴ Some writers have hypothesised a 'signs' source (for chapters 1-12) and a 'sayings' source (for the 'I am' discourses which follow

Notice that Jesus is comfortable talking with the woman even though she is a woman and even though she is not Jewish.

Notice also that he is aware of her circumstances - leading her to call him a **prophet** - yet he does not condemn her in any way and offers her *living water*.

Notice also the interlude with the return of the disciples and how Jesus speaks about his 'bread' being '*to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work*' and how this leads on to a teaching about how the disciples are *reaping the harvest* of the work done by those who have come before.

Notice also that, despite their apparent stupidity, Jesus does not condemn them either but teaches them patiently. Clearly there are echoes here of the disciples' experience of Jesus living and teaching among them.

Exercise: Notice how the evangelist makes clear that Jesus himself did not baptise, but - rather - it was his disciples who baptised. Why do you think he does this? What is the meaning of this baptism performed by the disciples?

Think about why the author uses the story of this Samaritan woman - what does the author want us to understand?

What more do you notice from reading the text slowly and prayerfully - how does it speak to you? How 'real' do the characters feel - can you picture them in your mind?

'I am...'

In John 8:56-59 we find Jesus' provocative words *to the Jews who had believed in him* - these are words so provocative that they turn away from following Jesus:¹⁵

'Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.' Then the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.' So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

The words of Jesus - 'I am' - reflect Exodus 3:14:

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."'

To use them of himself in a way that his hearers would have recognised was considered blasphemy - punishable by stoning. They were shocking even to Jesus' own followers and to the Christians of the early Church. Yet the author of John's gospel takes this phrase 'I am...' and uses it seven times on the lips of Jesus - this is central to Jesus' teaching and to the full understanding of who Jesus is in the understanding of the author:

¹⁵ This is also recounted, differently, in the synoptic gospels

- the Bread of Life (6:35)
- the Light of the World (8:12)
- the Door (10:9)
- the Good Shepherd (10:11,14)
- the Resurrection and the Life (11:25)
- the Way, the Truth and the Life (14:6)
- the Vine (15:1,5)

Let us look at the first of these:

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the lake saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.' Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' So they said to him, 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."' Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?' Jesus

answered them, 'Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.¹⁶

This passage follows the feeding of the five thousand. The author appears to take this miracle, also recounted by the synoptic authors, and uses it as the context of Jesus' teaching that he himself is the true bread from heaven. Christian Tradition will recognise this most fully in Christ's institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, yet, interestingly, the author of John, in his account of their final meal, never mentions this, replacing it with an account of Christ's washing of the disciples' feet.

¹⁶ John 6:22-66

Notice how Jesus teaches using the Jewish Scriptures - as he would surely have done - but brings the scriptural teaching forward as a present reality: Jesus is among them, here and now, as the Bread of Life.

As the other evangelists also recount, ultimately Jesus' teaching was too much for many of his followers and they left him. This begins the process of rejection which leads, ultimately, to Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion.

Like the other evangelists, John sees everything as pointing both towards the true nature of Jesus as uniquely Son of God, and also as One who would be rejected, would die and rise from death.

Notice how precise are the comings and goings of the crowd, of Jesus, and of his disciples. The event is recounted in great detail, with the exchanges between the crowd and Jesus presented word-for-word. These are not 'abstract ideas' about who Jesus is: these are a precise teaching rooted in an encounter between Jesus and the crowd who are hungry - not for bread and fish (as in the feeding recounted just prior to this extract), but for real sustenance.

Notice how intense is the exchange between the 'Jews' and Jesus. Notice how pressured and conflictual the language appears around them and their disputes. Notice, by contrast, the calm, open rhythm of Jesus' teaching. Perhaps we see here something of the *tone* in which Jesus spoke, which his disciples remembered.

Exercise: Read the above passage slowly - see what you notice that seems unfamiliar: there are always 'new' things to discover in the text if we read it carefully, as though for the first time. Imagine that you are a follower of Jesus, hungry for the 'bread that comes from heaven and gives life to the world' - compare it to the 'thirst' of the Samaritan woman. Can you feel your *own* sense of need? Can you sense how shocking are Jesus' words, '*Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*' As you sit with this text, what do you feel?

The words of Jesus

As mentioned, some writers believe that the 'I am...' sayings in the gospel of John all come from a single 'sayings' source.¹⁷

What happens to the extract above if we pull out the words of Jesus and look at them? Do they appear as one body of text or as a series of sayings of Jesus?

Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.

This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.

¹⁷ See footnote 11

Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.

It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.

[No-one] has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.

Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.

What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?

It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.

The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.

Exercise: Do you notice how some elements are repeated?

What happens if you put these elements together according to their theme - for example, if you place all the 'bread from heaven' elements together? Or the elements about 'spirit' and 'life'? Do you notice how the evangelist seems to have brought elements together to express their deeper meaning?

What difference does this make to your understanding of the text?