



# JOHN

*gospel  
for a  
new  
age*

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The commentaries explore a biblical book's audience, purpose, key themes, understanding of church, sense of mission and ministry. The series can be used as the basis for personal study and enrichment, for parish adult education programs and Scripture study groups, for retreats, and for personal theological and spiritual renewal.



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## **Introduction**

### **AN INDEPENDENT CHURCH'S VISION OF FAITH**

**A different understanding of the good news.** The Fourth Gospel is different from other New Testament writings. As a foundational document for Christian faith, it is both challenging and refreshing: challenging insofar as it calls to a mature faith, and refreshing insofar as it avoids the clutter of petty laws and power struggles so typical of inauthentic religion. The modern reader of the Synoptics is often distracted, knowing that several episodes and passages are used and abused, in season and out of season, by politically minded religious administrators to support their interpretations of faith or to justify their unwillingness to share the power they have come to love. John offers such insecure ministers little help in their venture. Although John appears only a few years later than the Synoptics, he presents a different tradition, one that focuses on the essentials of faith and one that shows how his community learns through its own pain to distance itself from the all-too-human aspects of organized religion.

The gospel draws its readers into a lyrical, frequently poetical, but very moving confession of faith. The portrait of Christ is awesome and commanding, but at the same time warm and loving. While not neglecting the humanity of Jesus, the Fourth Gospel emphasizes the preexistence and present glory of the Lord. Insight into who Jesus is, and faithful commitment to remain dedicated to him in obedience and love, are the challenges of every page of this proclamation. In fact, John's good news, particularly his christology, and his understanding of the nature of the Church, morality, discipleship, mission, and ministry, all flow from his faith

in Jesus. The Synoptics give us descriptions of the people Jesus met; the Fourth Gospel simply tells us of the Jesus people met.

The Fourth Gospel gives the impression that it comes from the fruits of reflection and deep prayer; it can hardly be appreciated without a mystical recollection; and it provokes a sense of union between readers and their Lord. Yet it is not an example of religious escapism into a devotionism unconnected with the real problems of struggling humanity.

We begin our study of the Fourth Gospel by considering the world of John. This gospel makes a remarkable contribution to the beginnings of Christianity in its faith-filled appreciation of Jesus the Lord, coming at a turning point in Christianity's development, and establishing the future direction of all the Church. The gospel, rooted in Judaism, presents the challenge of faith to the Hellenistic world. John's community is unique in early Christian history partly because of influences upon it and partly because of its diverse membership.

This unique contribution to early Christianity claims to be the vision of the Beloved Disciple. Chapter 2 examines the author, his style and use of symbolism, and the ways he challenges his readers. The tradition at the source of this gospel is independent of the Synoptics, and may well come from a school of thought that influences churches within a large region.

The Fourth Gospel presents the arrival of a new age in Jesus and interprets his teachings for believers in changing times (Chapter 3). This new age is the beginning of the final times and already evidences the universal judgment of humankind, dividing people into the world of Christ that is truth, light, spirit, and life, and the dark, false, shadowy existence of the evil prince of this world.

John stresses how authentic religion leads to enrichment and fullness of life. He states this purpose explicitly and also through Jesus' signs and discourses (Chapter 4).

Chapter 5 shows how John's portraits of God center on Jesus. The Father loves the world and offers it life through Jesus. The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus to continue Jesus' work and to make his teaching present again in ever new ways. Jesus is preexistent Lord, the Word and Son of God,

the Savior of the World, and the Son of Man. Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus is always shown as the exalted Lord in control of all the events, the center of the gospel, of the disciples' lives, and of world history.

Discipleship flows from one's vision of Jesus (Chapter 6). Disciples of Jesus are his own friends whose active response to the Lord's call produces a transformation of life that is preserved by abiding in Jesus in faith and love. This commitment has communal implications in building up the community in love through sharing life within the community and reaching out to witness to the world concerning the love of God (Chapter 7).

**A local church's interpretation of faith.** When John wrote his gospel, there were already signs of a uniform approach to Christianity. The decrees of the Council of Jerusalem, and Paul's claims to authority over several churches, were the beginnings of common impositions on churches with different foundational experiences. John's church preserved patterns of belief and practice which are quite different from the churches founded by the Twelve and their disciples, based upon the Synoptics and their tradition. The universal Church seems to have been reluctant to accept the Fourth Gospel as an authentic formulation of faith. In fact, John's vision of Christianity receives its initial support from heretical groups, a reaction that John will struggle to put behind him. The Johannine community develops in a parallel way to the Great Mother Church and finds little reason to establish unity with it until after the death of the Beloved Disciple. By that time the Johannine communities have their own religious emphases: a portrait of Christ as preexistent Lord, a view of discipleship as abiding in Jesus, and a reluctance towards accepting institutionalized aspects of religion. Their traditions contained little reference to structures, discipline, or ethics. Yet they were convinced that their interpretation was valid, traceable to a Beloved Disciple, and a vision from which the rest of the Church could learn. When the occasion and need for unity with the rest of the Church came, the Johannine community sacrificed some of its interpretations but kept most, enriching the universal Church with its vision.

For about four decades, John's community had struggled

to formulate its understanding of faith so as to give room to a variety of groups. The theological vision that emerged was eventually accepted by the universal Church, even though the Great Church absorbed the Johannine community into its own structures. John's gospel remains as a warning to anyone who would like to stamp out different interpretations of our common faith. Authoritarian imposition of uniform interpretations of faith damages the Church's ability to grow and limits the maturing of faith, as well as showing the immaturity of those who need it for their own comfort and security. Only totalitarian regimes see uniformity and the stunting of creativity as desirable. Faith can never be authentic when imposed, nor does it grow as a result of authorities' control and imposition. In the 1980s, several Christian groups and churches have demonstrated an immature authoritarian approach to faith, thus damaging the credibility of Christianity as a movement that leads to integral growth. John's formulation of faith challenged the world Church by being different while insisting that its interpretation was valid. So, too, contemporary regional and local churches throughout the world should learn from John to preserve their own approaches and to enrich the Church with their differences. When local churches run in the company of Peter, they may well arrive at vision before him; and although they respectfully let him enter first, they may well be more mature in their faith than Peter (20:3-8).

The growth of contemporary Christianity does not take place at the level of the universal Church but at the level of the local church. Vision and growth do not filter down to the people, but percolate up. John's spirit of independence within ecclesial union is an excellent model for local churches in the 1980s and 1990s.

**Dedication to the essentials of religion.** John's gospel has no lists of laws, no detailed handbook on discipleship, no recommended attitudes for vigilantly awaiting the end, no emphasis on discipline, no focus on ethics. He gives no church structure and does not refer to human channels of authority; in fact he excludes even a list of the Twelve.

Present-day religion in America and elsewhere seems overconcerned with structures, authority, power, and money.

It shows arrogant, exclusive claims to orthodoxy for one minority or another's interpretation of faith; treats opposition with spite and nastiness; has not addressed the rectification of organized injustice against women; and will not change laws that could be changed. Many outspoken "religious" statements are on issues that were present in Jesus' life but which he never chose to address.

John challenges the quality of religious commitment. There is no clutter of laws, power, and money, such as we see in much contemporary religion. He calls for a faith that is unflinching, as he draws out the implications of early Christian beliefs and firmly expresses the absolute centrality of the preexistent Lord. This gospel challenges disciples to believe in Jesus and his teachings, and to convincingly confess that he is the center of history, their God, their all.

The Johannine Jesus, while rejecting the powerful centers of religion of his day, calls all to worship in spirit and in truth. Disciples find that John removes the comfortable supports of traditional religious practices, community devotions, priestly guidance, and moral and ritual legalism. He calls for an abiding union with Jesus, convinced that all other issues will take care of themselves.

John's only command to prove one's dedication is love of God and love of neighbor. This love is a participation in the life and love of God. Given the differences among members of his community, John might well have given in to prescriptive religion and established laws and directives for community discipline and uniformity. Instead he chose to stress love, without which the laws serve little purpose except to give power to the law-givers.

John, convinced that authentic religion is a way of seeing the world, presents an integrated approach to life that leads to growth. The believer lives in truth, knows the light of life, wants to see the true way, is nourished by the vision of Jesus, and satisfies a thirst for answers to life's problems. The genuine believer is willing to go public with faith, to take risks, and to pay the price of convictions.

Authentic religion is not sexist. John presents women in key roles of faith and witness. Men are as dependent on women as sources of testimony as women are on men. No

authority is based on sex; men do nothing women do not do. John's presentation avoids the early exclusion of women, a trend that itself postdates Christ, rationalizing inauthentic expressions of religion up to our own day.

**Gospel for a new age.** Amidst all the problems of contemporary religion, some churches are facing up to their deficiencies and strengthening their vision. Men and women are abandoning expressions of religion that fall short of their human hopes. In some cases, they leave pastors who are out-of-date with their church and world, going across town to another parish. In other cases, people change a religious tradition their family may have held for generations. People who yearn for God and authentic forms of religious living now find some of their hopes satisfied as they integrate religion with their deep loves and hopes of life.

Many well-educated Christians, dedicated to their families and country, value freedom and independence as they direct their lives to God. Expecting religion to be relevant to themselves, and not an imported commodity parallel to their national, cultural, and family values, they carefully examine past experiences, knowing many of them are good and play a meaningful part in the religious direction of their lives.

John's different gospel holds particular appeal in our changing times. A maverick, he holds firm to his independent expression of Christianity and gives little value to many expressions of religion in which our contemporaries also see little worth. John sees unity with the Mother Church as a value, but also knows other churches can learn from his community's expressions of faith. A universal vision of Church is built up from the contributions of local churches; it does not filter down from high in the structures.

Churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, are experiencing a decrease in vocations to the institutionalized priesthood, but an increase in vocations to ministry among the laity, as rank and file members respond to God's call to service of others. As the latter take over many positions of ministry, we see new images of Church developing, and John's discipleship model again gives encouragement, direction, and hope.

The goods news of Jesus was expressed in varied ways by the different communities of the four evangelists; sometimes



**one, and sometimes another, seem to call and challenge us with increased relevance. John's daring expression of faith is particularly special as the following pages will show.**



## Chapter One

# THE WORLD OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

*The true light, which enlightens everyone,  
was coming into the world. He was in the world,  
the world came to be through him, but  
the world did not know him. (Jn 1:9-10)*

The Fourth Gospel presents the extraordinary dedication of a community whose faith had taken on different formulations than other Christian communities. Differing notably from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John's bold proclamation is shaped by conflict with several Jewish groups, by hostility from the surrounding world, and by tension with the developing Mother Church of Christianity. John's distinctive form of Christian belief and practice survives alongside that of the Synoptics and eventually enriches the maturing faith of the expanding Church.

Better than any other New Testament work, John's gospel demonstrates the importance of a local, independent expression of faith and how that faith can grow through dedicated struggle. It shows a community's successful integration of sub-groups and potential opponents while avoiding a superficial religious eclecticism. It portrays courageous independence without allowing itself to become exclusive or sectarian. Admittedly, the community has weaknesses, some of which grow into serious heresies. Nevertheless, its creative struggle enriches Christianity in the first century, as it continues to do now. Its painful efforts to gain recognition from the wider community of Christians resemble the struggles of contemporary Christian churches whose expression of faith is conditioned by regional values and culture.

John's gospel makes unyielding claim to be based on the testimony of an early eyewitness of Jesus' life, deeds, and

teachings, even insisting that this trustworthy account comes from a disciple who was more faithful to Jesus than the founders of the early mainline churches. Although claiming to be rooted in history, John's is the gospel that, more than any other, portrays the Jesus of faith in its high christology.

Although strongly influenced by Judaism, John's gospel probably was not written in Palestine. John's community, part of a large cosmopolitan city, experienced most of the social and religious challenges of first-century Christianity. This community interacted with the followers of John the Baptist; was aware of issues important to the various Jewish religious groups, such as the Essenes and the Pharisees; dialogued with the Samaritans; and was sensitive to the religious values and convictions of the Hellenistic world.

John's gospel brings an interesting perspective to the history of the missionary expansion of the Christian movement, its search for unity and orthodoxy, and its struggle with persecution. Since John's community exemplifies growth patterns, structures, creed, and discipleship different from other churches, it helps us appreciate the pluralism of early Christianity. Since John's gospel is the expression of a community that is molded, challenged, and oppressed by its environment, this first chapter focuses on the world of John's gospel.

## **The Beginnings of Christianity**

**The Jesus of history.** Around the year 27 CE, during a period of religious revival, the prophet John the Baptist preached repentance and baptized the converted. He preached along the river Jordan, the location of other renewal movements besides his own, and the gospels attest that John baptized Jesus (Mk 1:9; Mt 3:13). Shortly after this encounter, Jesus began his own ministry which lasted between one and three years, depending on the evangelists' varied presentations. According to John, the early ministry of Jesus coincided with the forty-sixth year of the rebuilding of the Temple, which would be 27 or 28 CE (Jn 2:20).

Jesus was a Galilean, and his early ministry began in the open-minded northern regions of the country. Jesus, who was in his thirties when he began his work (Lk 3:23), spoke Aramaic, as did his disciples, although Greek was also spoken

in several of the places he visited. The Jewish historian Josephus and several rabbis, in addition to his own followers, affirm that Jesus exorcised demons and healed the sick, practices also known among other charismatic figures of the times. His teaching, often presented in parables, stressed the coming of God's reign and probably implied that the end of the world would be coming soon. Crowds appreciated his teaching and respectfully addressed Jesus as "rabbi." He was bold in challenging Jewish leaders' interpretations of the Law and gained a reputation for breaking the Law by his Sabbath healings and his attitudes to ritual prescriptions and rabbinical practices. A non-conformist, Jesus gained a substantial following among the masses, and this did not endear him to religious authorities who checked on his orthodoxy even when he preached in Galilee (Mk 2:24; 3:22).

Probably sometime in the year 30 CE, Jesus made his final journey to Jerusalem. The Jewish religious authorities clearly wanted to be rid of him, and the betrayal of Jesus by one of his own close followers provided them with an opportunity. Jesus, who consistently preached about the reign of God and spoke about it as an end-time banquet, celebrated a special meal with his disciples the evening before his arrest. After the meal he went with his disciples to Gethsemane, a garden on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives where, no doubt, they intended to spend the night sleeping in the open, planning to return to the city the next day for the national feast. However, Jesus was taken prisoner. He was interrogated by the High Priest, Caiaphas, son-in-law of the religious power broker and real authority, Annas; was questioned by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, who was visiting Jerusalem at the time of the Passover feast; and was eventually tried and condemned by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. Since Jesus was not stoned to death, the penalty for blasphemy, there can be no reason to doubt that he was executed by the Romans for political reasons; the charges may have been trumped-up and misrepresented by some of the High Priest's court and supporters. Jesus' crucifixion occurred around 30 CE.

The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (37-100? CE) who had collaborated with the Romans when they invaded Palestine

in 67-70 CE, offers limited information about Jesus' ministry, his miracle-working activity, and his passion. In *Antiquities of the Jews*, he refers to Jesus by name and gives a brief description of his ministry.<sup>1</sup>

Interpretations of the Law by authoritative rabbis of the first and second centuries CE are collected in the Mishnah. One of these rabbis, Eliezer, a disciple of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai — the founder of the Jamnian school, and a contemporary of Jesus — speaks slightly of Jesus in a passage that implies Jesus' miraculous activity, and suggests something unusual about his birth. The same rabbi Eliezer was later arrested and falsely accused of holding Christian beliefs. His trial scene documents the historical fact of Jesus' life and ministry, the support Christianity received in Galilee, and the Jews' desire to stamp out the teachings of Jesus. While Jewish sources give no new information about Jesus and are generally polemical, they confirm the success of his healing and teaching ministry, his challenge to authorities, and his crucifixion.<sup>2</sup>

For believers and non-believers alike, Jesus is one of the greatest figures of history. Yet his public life lasted at the most three years, and little is known of the precise events. Nothing is known of his early life. Since the prophets foretold the Messiah's davidic ancestry, early Christians presumed Jesus was born in David's city of Bethlehem. The date of his birth is unknown and is arrived at by calculating backwards for thirty years (Lk 3:23), giving an approximate date of 5-6 BCE.<sup>3</sup> The traditional date of December 25th is a Christian adaptation of the birthday of the Sun, following the winter solstice which occurs about December 21st.

**Jesus of faith.** Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written in the early 50s CE, affirms that Jesus "was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4). A little later, in his letter to the Romans, he claims that Jesus was "established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness, through resurrection from the dead" (Rm 1:4). In the same letter he proclaims: "We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him" (Rm 6:9). Elsewhere he states that "if Christ has

not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith" (1 Cor 15:14). All these Pauline credal statements come from the 50s and are based on earlier formulations from missionary preaching.

Luke's Acts of the Apostles, written between 85 and 95 CE, again tells us "God raised him [Jesus] from the dead; of this we are his witnesses" (Acts 3:15; 4:10). "God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses. . . . Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:32, 36). Peter tells the Gentile Cornelius about Jesus' resurrection: "This man God raised [on] the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commissioned us to preach to the people and testify that he is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness, that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10: 40-43).

Like all religions, Christianity begins in the middle of the founder's life when people, moved by his charismatic qualities or by the purity of his teaching, become aware of the leader's salvific power and dedicate themselves as followers. This communal intuition that the leader can save them from life's sin is the central experience that gives birth to faith which when shared becomes a religion. For Christians, this central communal religious experience is the resurrection. The followers know only a little of their founder's recent life, and they now move forward as disciples to spread the message. As they move forward in time to express their faith through missionary expansion, they also move backwards in time expressing their faith through the reconstruction of their founder's unknown earlier life. Luke does this, telling us about Jesus when he was twelve years old (Lk 2:41-52), and both Matthew and Luke give us the narratives of the birth of Jesus and even events surrounding his conception. As disciples enthusiastically dedicate their lives to the Lord, new questions arise about the founder, the source of his power, his relationship to the Father, and his own nature.

Since very little is known of Jesus before his appearance along the river Jordan, the answers to disciples' questions are expressions of faith more than historical information. Thus the infancy narratives of Matthew tell us what the Old Testament expected the Messiah to be, more than what Jesus' early life was like. Luke's infancy narratives are more a pre-ministry understanding of who Jesus will later be recognized as rather than who he was.

John's gospel was composed later than other gospels, even though possibly based on earlier traditions. Although further away from actual historical events, the evangelist makes claims that his knowledge of the Jesus of history is completely reliable. At the same time, this gospel presents the Jesus of faith in a more profound and conclusive way than any other New Testament writing. John draws out the implications of earlier traditions and in doing so stands apart from the Synoptics in his higher christology. His message is profound but easily exploited by heretics. The Mother Church will integrate the insights and benefit from them but will also have to warn against exaggerations and confront heretical deviations.

## **The Jewish Roots of Christianity**

**Judaism.** John's gospel presumes knowledge of Judaism: its history, religion, sects, feasts, and laws. The Jews traced their ancestry to Abraham, a semi-nomad from upper-Mesopotamia, who migrated to the land of Canaan in the early part of the second millenium (c. 1800 BCE). Abraham's descendants, Isaac and Jacob, lived in the hill country of Canaan until a famine drove the sons of Jacob, the twelve patriarchs, to migrate to Egypt in search of food. The Hebrews remained in "the land of Goshen," a fertile area in the east of the Nile delta, first welcomed, then enslaved, until early in the reign of Pharaoh Ramases II (c. 1290-1224 BCE). Ramases' father, Seti I, moved his capital city from Thebes to Avaris and enslaved the Hebrews to construct the cities of Avaris, later renamed Ramases, and Pithom, which was in the heart of the region where the patriarchs had settled.

A Hebrew leader arose called Moses, who is unknown outside the Bible. His name is Egyptian and thus the Bible's