

PERSONAL DIVINITY & JOHN

Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the *synoptic* gospels because they present a *common view* of Jesus. These first three gospels are remarkably similar, particularly in the events that are chronicled – albeit with varied nuances with each writer.

The Gospel of John represents a radical departure from the synoptic gospel formulation. This gospel clearly appears to rely on different sources of information. John's account of the ministry of Jesus contains substantial information found in no other gospel. And, by comparison with the synoptics, John is also significant for its omissions.

Unlike the synoptics, John makes virtually no use of parables. There is no hint of Jesus as a social revolutionary.

John's gospel contains only three descriptions of healing miracles, none of which are found in the synoptics. John also describes five nature miracles, only one of which (the feeding of 5,000) can also be found in the synoptics. And unlike the synoptics, John's Jesus makes virtually no reference to any form of hell for those condemned.

Modern scholars often simply do not know what to make of John. Some place less emphasis on John as an historically reliable representation of the teachings and actions of the historical Jesus. For example, the work of the post-modern *Jesus Seminar* articulates the "diminished role the Gospel of John plays in the search for the Jesus of history."

This rejection of John's Gospel is nothing new. There is a reason, essentially rooted in a heresy that packs as much punch today as in the early church.

In short, the heresy of John's gospel is that of a Jesus who gets *up close and personal* – over and over and over again.

Matthew's Jesus speaks of a new religious order that represents a fulfillment of history. Mark's Jesus is earthy but also contemptuous of even his closest associates. Luke's Jesus becomes a sort of divine social worker. But in all three synoptics, Jesus can not and does not get too close to those he came to save, to heal, to comfort.

John's Jesus is different. The first words uttered by Jesus in John are a question aimed at two who were following him: "What are you looking for?" They reply: "Rabbi, where are you staying." Right off, Jesus gets up close and personal, with a simple invitation: "Come and see."

John presents a Jesus who tells a wealthy Pharisee and Jewish ruler (Nicodemus) that he must be born again. And early on, John also portrays a Jesus who interacts in a deeply personal way with a Samaritan (a woman) at a well, including a recounting of her five past marriages and current live-in partner.

BACKGROUND OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

More so than with the synoptic writers, scholars have widely divergent perspectives on the dating, authorship and tradition of John the disciple of Jesus.

Gospel Dating: John's account of the life of Jesus is generally (though not universally) recognized as the last of the canonical gospels to be written. Yet paradoxically, one of the earliest known manuscript fragments attributable to any New Testament book comes from John – the Bodmer Papyrus II (Johannine Codex P66) dated to about 125 AD.

The late 2nd century Christian apologist Irenaeus makes clear that John was penned after Matthew, Mark and Luke. He writes: "Lastly John, the disciple of the Lord, who had leant back on His breast, once more set forth the gospel, while residing at Ephesus in Asia."

A composition date of 80-90 AD is often suggested by scholars of the last two centuries. In part, this is due to accounts of hostile relations between Jesus and Jewish leaders, including expulsion from synagogues – an event coinciding with the growing rift between adherents to a nascent Christianity and Jewish society near the end of the first century.

This view also appears to be supported by the late second century theologian, Clement of Alexandria. Clement writes that: "Last of all, aware that the physical facts had been recorded in the gospels, encouraged by his pupils and *irresistibly moved by the Spirit*, John wrote a spiritual gospel."

Some (typically evangelical) scholars have suggested an earlier date, perhaps as early as the 50s and certainly no later than 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed. An argument for this position is the statement in that there "is" (rather than "was") a Sheep Gate suggests a time before 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed.

Authorship: The traditional view is that John, the "disciple whom Jesus loved," authored this gospel. However, the author is never explicitly identified by name in the text.

Early Christian writers such as Irenaeus (c. 140-203) and Tertullian (c. 150-222) attest to John as the author. Few of the extant early writers suggest authorship of this gospel by anyone else – with the exception of some who suggest John was written by the Jewish-Gnostic heretic Cerinthus.

The Tradition of John: This apostle was the brother of James the apostle and son of Zebedee. The case has been made that John may have been a first cousin of Jesus. The apostle John also has been widely though not universally considered as the author of the book of Revelation. However, while authorship is directly attributed right from the start of Revelation to "his servant John," there has long been scholarly and theological confusion as to who this John really was. In the third century, Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria stated the conundrum thusly: "That the writer (of Revelation) was John he himself states, and we must believe him. *But which John?*"

Fourth century historian Eusebius writes that, as early as the second century, Papias, the Bishop of Hierapollis, identified the confusion as resulting from two Johns who had been buried in Ephesus – the apostle John and another known as John the Elder (or presbyter). The author of II and III John, in fact, refers to himself as “the elder.” Papias also wrote that both the apostle John and the Presbyter John were considered as those that “teach the truth.”

DIVINITY PERSONALIZED

John’s gospel is all about *God becoming human*. But John goes further. In the form of Jesus, God becomes eminently approachable, even intimate. This sense of intimacy represents a breakthrough both from the God of the Jewish scriptures and the God of the other gospel writers.

The very first words uttered by Jesus in John’s gospel come shortly after his baptism. Two disciples of John the Baptist turn to follow Jesus, who also turns and directly asks: “What *are you* looking for?” The two disciples ask where Jesus is staying. Jesus replies simply: “Come and see.” The author of John’s gospel goes on to state that: “They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.”

Several Johannine themes indicated by this initial encounter recur throughout this gospel:

- Jesus is *very direct* in his questions and comments. His answers require direct involvement of the hearer.
- Jesus wastes no time to *interact* with those around him. Unlike the dismissive Jesus whom the synoptic writer Mark describes, John’s Jesus is always trying to build up the capabilities and insights of those around him. For example, when Andrew introduces his brother Simon to Jesus, the master greets this newcomer warmly: “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated as Peter or *rock*).
- John’s Jesus is ready to *offer opinions* about other people. The day after Andrew brings Peter, Philip introduces Jesus to Nathanael. The first question posed by Nathanael to his friend is steeped in skepticism: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Later, when Jesus sees Nathanael coming towards him, Jesus comments: “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is *no deceit*.” The sense of recognition is mutual, with Nathanael observing on this first encounter, “Rabbi, you are the *Son of God!* You are the King of Israel!”

We could tell of other *up front and personal* encounters. Examples include Jesus’ manufacture of wine on behalf of his mother, interaction with a Jewish leader named Nicodemus who is encouraged to be “born again,” and dialogue with a Samaritan woman over “living water.” And so it goes.

John's Jesus is constantly in motion – moving from the elucidation of complex and at times bizarre spiritual concepts to personal, even intimate, interactions – and then back again. The Jesus of John's gospel rarely speaks in the third person voice, but rather in the first person (“I am”) and the second person (“You...”). Unlike the synoptics who portray Jesus as uncomfortable with any disclosure of a possible divine role, in John Jesus' special link to the divine is openly acknowledged by many if not most of those with whom he comes in contact.

We *fast forward* now to another event found uniquely in John's gospel – the death and resurrection of Lazarus. As with the other accounts noted, Jesus' interaction with Lazarus and his sisters can be described as intensely intimate. This one vignette conveys:

- The readily apparent and oft repeated affection between Jesus and the entire family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary.
- The way in which this affection moved Jesus – literally to tears as “Jesus wept.”
- The deliberate decision of Jesus to delay his arrival due to an ulterior motive – to demonstrate the healing power of the divine, the victory of life over death.
- The intimacy of the connection between Jesus and the Father to whom he prayed – apparently a model for the relationship between Jesus and his earthly flock.

John's focus on *divinity personalized* also is evident by contrasting events found in the fourth gospel with similar events also reported by the synoptics. Consider the divergent accounts offered of the interactions with the disciples around the time of the last supper.

Only John's gospel speaks of the “love” Jesus has for his disciples on their last evening together. Only John then records Jesus getting up from the table, taking off his outer robe, tying a towel around himself, pouring water into a basin, washing the feet of his disciples, then drying them with the towel.

The uniquely intimate nature of the exchange in John's account is apparent from what follows. Note: phrases in *italics* are exclusively recorded by John.

The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. *One of his disciples -- the one whom Jesus loved -- was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So, while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.'* So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. *After he received the piece of bread, Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.'* No one at the table knew why he said this to him. *Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival;' or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.*

Intimate details of two remarkably different scenes are offered only by John's version of the last supper. First is the snapshot of the disciple "whom Jesus loved" reclining next to Jesus. To ask a question, Peter must do so through this other disciple.

Second is the personal connection of a very different, more painful sort. Jesus dips the bread, gives it to Judas, then advises: "Do quickly what you are going to do." This is an exchange shared by Jesus and Judas directly; the other disciples are left to second guess what is taking place.

No Hell: Of the four gospels, John is unique in that there are virtually no references to any of the Hebrew or Greek terms for Hell. John's Jesus speaks plainly about issues of judgement and condemnation, but not once of a physical place identified by other gospel writers as hell.

However, John's Jesus is forthright about the condemnation that awaits unbelievers. In speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus explains that "...those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

And John's Jesus uses the illustration of the vine to indicate that believers who do not bear fruit is as a vine branch cut off from the vine, collected and cast into the fire. So with this gospel writer we have an anomaly – condemnation yes, hell no.

Acceptance of John: John was accepted in some quarters but not necessarily in others. The gospel was suspect at times because of its appeal to Gnostics. A secondary cause for concern was the presumed late dating of this gospel. However, it met the canonical criteria of widespread use and the tradition of an apostolic author.

JOHN IN SUMMARY

This is a peculiar gospel. John's Jesus gets up close and personal. With an intimacy that can be wonderful, awesome, mysterious, transcendent, painful. Almost like touching God.

John's Jesus is divinity personalized, the Jewish Messiah, the word, the eternal "I am." This is no social revolutionary, but a man who reaches out to interact on a personal level with both woman and men.

This is a god-man who offers a carrot and carries a stick. The carrot is the promise of eternal life; the stick becomes the threat of condemnation, though apparently not necessarily to a never-ending hell.

In positioning Jesus as the "way, the truth and the life," God the Father takes a more distant, hands-off role. The Father still is in charge, but leaves the messy details of interacting with humanity on a day-to-day basis with the Son.

John's Jesus does not engage in denial or obfuscation of his messianic role. He speaks openly and directly – both as the "I am" and "Son of God".

No wonder that some readers – often scholars – have so much difficulty dealing with or simply reject this peculiar gospel. Others – particularly those of an evangelistic or charismatic bent – embrace this Jesus as one who is and is in all, one with God and man.

This excerpt is adapted from the “The Heresy of John: Personal Divinity,” further detailed in the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For more, check out the web site: www.jesustheheresy.com