PARALLEL GUIDE 13

The Gospel According to John, Part I

Summary

The study of the Gospel According to John is organized in two chapters. This chapter introduces the Gospel, addresses questions of authorship and origin, and provides an outline. It also discusses the first six chapters which include the Book of Signs.

Learning Objectives

• Read the first six chapters of the Gospel According to John

• Learn the main elements of the outline of the Gospel According to John

• Learn what scholars think the origin and authorship of this Gospel may be

• Discover in what ways John's Gospel is like and yet different from the three Synoptic Gospels

• Study how "Logos" is used by John and how this differs from what Greek philosophers have written

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

Explore why the church in its worship often has preferred to use the prologue to the Gospel According to John as its Christmas lectionary reading rather than the Gospel narrative about the birth of Jesus, especially that of the Gospel According to Luke. Look up "docetism" in a theological dictionary. What is your view of Jesus in relationship to this term? What terms do you sometimes hear about Jesus that we might label "docetic"?

Preparing for Your Seminar

The phrase "eternal life" appears frequently in the Gospels and especially in the Gospel According to John. The text suggests that this is about "living the life of God" and emphasizes a certain quality of life rather than a comment on the length of life. What do you think? What does eternal life mean to you? How is this interpreted in our culture?

Works Cited

David Daube, The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism (London: Athlone, 1956; reprinted New York: Ayer, 1984).

Barnabas Lindars, Behind the Fourth Gospel, Studies in Creative Criticism 3 (London: S.P.C.K., 1971).

Chapter 13
THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN, PART I

The Gospel According to John is often called "the Fourth Gospel" and its writer "the Fourth Evangelist." This terminology distinguishes John's Gospel from the Synoptic Gospels, whose traditions are interrelated,

while John's outline and contents seem quite different. The Fourth Gospel is written in Greek, but with a strong Semitic coloring, as if the author were influenced by reading the Hebrew Bible in a Greek translation. John seems familiar with Palestinian geography and oral Torah, leading many to William Temple's judgment: "I regard as self-condemned any theory which fails to find a very close connection between the Gospel and John the son of Zebedee."

Author, Date, and Origin

The assertion of apostolic authorship for John is comparatively late. Ignatius of Antioch, writing about 112 CE to the church at Ephesus, does not mention John or this Gospel, although he does mention Paul. In fact, there is no early evidence at all to connect John with either Ephesus or a Gospel.

Irenaeus, writing about 180 CE, said that "John, the disciple of the Lord, published his gospel while staying at Ephesus in Asia." Irenaeus appealed to the memory of Polycarp (who died around 155 CE), saying that as a boy he had heard Polycarp describe his "conversation with John and with others who had seen the Lord" (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 5.20.4-8).

Scholars point to differences between John and the Synoptics as evidence that the former cannot be the work of an eyewitness. This argument is two-edged. Whether or not the Fourth Evangelist had access to any of our Synoptic Gospels (another hotly disputed question), the Fourth Gospel appears to be an interpretation or midrash on the kind of tradition they contain. But by whom? One claiming the freedom to create such a midrash might well be expected to have apostolic warrant—but, then, Christian preachers regularly make such a claim in every age. Thus Barnabas Lindars speaks of the "homiletic" development of the Jesus tradition in John, and its next stage in the First Letter of John, a sermonic composition for which John's Gospel is in effect the "text."

The Gospel itself appears to claim not so much that it is written by an eyewitness as that it is based on eyewitness testimony (19:35; 21:24). As suggested in the case of Matthew (Chapter Nine), the Fourth Gospel may be the work of a school, possibly one tracing its traditions to John the son of Zebedee.

This Gospel is usually dated in the nineties of the first Christian century. The earliest manuscript fragment we have of John is dated no later than about 125 CE. Possible outlines for John differ only in small divisions. The Gospel falls into two obvious halves: chapters 2-12 (signs and discourses) and 13-20 (farewell and Pas-

Structure

sion). An opening hymn (1:1-18) is followed by a narrative introduction to the first half, and chapter 21 is a conclusion to the whole. One might think of this Gospel as a Greek drama, with Jesus as protagonist, the Jews, antagonists, and the disciples and/or crowds as chorus. One might think of it as an opera, with an overture stating the main themes to follow and then a grand finale.

The outline below suggests some recurring features (discourse, dialogue, division, etc.) that will be discussed in the verse-by-verse exposition to follow. Chapters 12-13 are laid out separately in order to emphasize the way they function as a great hinge in the middle of the Gospel, moving back and forth in linking the two great sections that Raymond Brown and others call "the Book of Signs" and "the Book of Glory."

Overture 1:1-18—Prologue: Hymn to the Word; thematic introduction I

1:19-51—Narrative Introduction: witnesses to the Word; thematic introduction II

Book of Signs

2:1-11—First Sign (Jesus turns water into wine)
2:12-25—Jesus in Jerusalem, including “cleansing” of the Temple
3:1-36—Jesus and Nicodemus: dialogue, discourse (birth), testimony
4:1-46a—Jesus and the Samaritan woman: dialogue, discourse (water), testimony
4:46b-54—Second Sign (Jesus heals the official’s son)
5:1-47—Third Sign (Jesus heals the lame man)
6:1-15—Fourth Sign (Jesus feeds the multitude)
6:16-21—Fifth Sign (Jesus walking on the water)
6:22-59—Jesus and the Jews: dialogue, discourse (bread)
6:60-71—Jesus and his disciples: dialogue, testimony, division
7:1-52—Jesus and the Jews: dialogue, testimony, division
7:53-8:11—Jesus and the adulterous woman and the Jews
8:12-59—Jesus and the Jews: dialogue, division, condemnation

9:1-34—Sixth Sign (Jesus heals the man born blind): dialogue, testimony, division
9:35-10:21—Jesus and the Jews: dialogue, discourse (shepherd), division
10:22-42—Jesus and the Jews in Jerusalem: dialogue, discourse (shepherd), condemnation
11:1-44—Seventh Sign (Jesus raises Lazarus)
11:45-57—The Jews against Jesus: condemnation
12:1-11—Jesus and the Bethany household: eating, anointing, division, condemnation

Transition
12:12-19—Jesus and the entry into Jerusalem: acclamation, testimony, condemnation
12:20-36—Jesus and the Greeks: dialogue, discourse (glorification), division
12:37-50—Jesus and the Jews: discourse (judgment), condemnation, division
13:1-30—Jesus and the disciples: eating, washing, dialogue, division
13:31-38—Jesus and the disciples: discourse (love command), dialogue, division

Book of Glory
14:1-16:33—Jesus and the disciples: farewell discourses
17:1-26—Jesus alone: intercessory prayer
118:1-19:42—Jesus betrayed, arrested, denied, tried, crucified, derided, buried, mourned
20:1-29—Jesus risen
20:1-10—Jesus gone from the tomb: testimony
20:11-18—Jesus and Mary Magdalene: testimony
20:19-23—Jesus and the disciples: testimony
20:24-29—Jesus and Thomas: testimony

Conclusion
20:30-31—colophon (inscription placed at the end of a book)
21:1-19—coda: Jesus and the disciples: testimony, dialogue, direction
21:20-25—attestation: Jesus and the beloved disciple

Sources for the Fourth Gospel

Judging from a certain unevenness in style and narrative links, many have thought that the Gospel has undergone several stages in its composition and that sign-stories and discourses and dialogues may have been

circulated separately before being brought together here. Many scholars agree that some collection of signs, narratives, some source for discourse material, an independently circulating hymn something like the prologue, and a Passion-source lie behind our present John. Many think that chapter 21 was added by the one who finally turned these sources into the Gospel we now know. These sources are hypothetical although quite plausible in many ways. In what follows no attempt is made to sort out the sources of particular passages. The Gospel as it stands is what was included in the canon. It evidently made sense in its present form to those who made the church's early decisions about its fundamental literature. Seeking to understand the Fourth Gospel does not commit us to any particular theory of its origin. What is at stake is not how it got that way, but what it means.

Similarities to the Synoptics

The outline of John, like that of the other Gospels, follows the pattern of the kerygma. Moreover, many details of the material in John are similar to those in the Synoptics. Jesus heals the sick (4:46-54), debates with religious authorities (8:12-20), is accused of infringing the Sabbath (5:9-18), and has dealings with the am ha-arets and sinners (4:1-54). In chapter 6 there is a sequence in Markan order—feeding the multitude, crossing the lake, a dispute about bread, and a crisis among the disciples, at the heart of which there is a confession by Peter. We cannot tell whether the Fourth Evangelist knew one or more Synoptics, or one or more of their sources, or one or more other sources—either oral or written.

Differences from the Synoptics

Yet there are also striking differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels. The Fourth Gospel seems to be arranged in issue-centered collections of dialogues and discourses in a narrative framework. In seven of these there is a prophet-like act of Jesus (usually called a "sign"; see 2:11; 4:54). Each section ends with some kind of response: acclamation, testimony, division, or condemnation.

Several of these collections have no counterpart in the Synoptics, and those that do generally differ in both content and sequence from the synoptic outline. John has no birth/infancy narrative, no account of Jesus' temptation, no Transfiguration, no confession of Peter, no "words of institution" at the Last Supper. John has no synoptic-like "parables of the kingdom," but does have a number of forceful images for Jesus, some of them developed at length (bread, shepherd, vine). The story of Jesus' baptism in John is very different from that in the Synoptics, and the "cleansing" of the Temple comes early rather than late. The synoptic "miracles" are not found in

John except for the feeding of the five thousand—the only miracle story told in all four Gospels—although a couple of the stories resemble synoptic narratives (the healings of the official's son and the blind man). Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances in John are not those of any of the Synoptics.

In Mark's central section on discipleship (chapters 8-10) Jesus predicts his Passion three times. Matthew and Luke follow Mark in this respect. John does not include any of the three predictions in synoptic form, but John does have a functional equivalent: the promise of the Son of Man being "lifted up" (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:34). Again and again the Fourth Gospel uses some term or device or episode that operates similarly to something in the first three Gospels, but seems at first to be missing in John.

Jesus in the Fourth Gospel

The "colophon" stresses the aim of the Gospel: that its addressees "may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing" they "may have life in his name" (20:30-31). But the identity of Jesus as Messiah does not unfold as it does in the Synoptics. It is clear from the outset who Jesus

is—that is what the argument is about in the central section of the Book of Signs. Thus John has no account of Jesus being "transfigured," so that his heavenly glory appears for a time. Rather, Jesus is transfigured throughout the Fourth Gospel. He is always the one sent from heaven, not just the itinerant rabbi whose heavenly character gradually emerges. The hymn in the prologue proclaims this character at the outset, and the end of the narrative introduction promises nothing less than traffic between earth and heaven (1:51) in what is to follow.

Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is the same Jesus as in the Synoptics: preacher, healer, "prophet like Moses," in both what he says and what he does. Additionally, Jesus appears in John as the heaven-sent revealer of God's purposes and humankind's possibilities. Jesus' own death is presented as his glorification, a further revelation of who he is and who God is and who we can be if we believe in him. In the Synoptics Jesus proclaims God's kingdom, but in John he speaks more of having life through believing in him or coming to him (e.g., 4:14; 5:24, 40; 6:40; 11:25-26). As usual in scripture, both Old Testament and New Testament, "believing" or "having faith" is not intellectual assent to propositions but trusting reliance upon the promises of God. The believer then becomes a person of reliability, of integrity, of godly character—like Jesus. That is what John means by eternal life: not existence without end, but living the life of God—the kind of life God lives—in the world. Thus the believing community, like Jesus, shows God to the world in the way believers live. This is the incarnational principle, as it comes to be known later: the showing forth of God in human flesh (cf. John 1:14, 18).

The Johannine Community

John's original setting was most likely the first-century Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora. The Gospel was probably addressed to a Jewish-Christian community embroiled in sharp controversy with the local synagogue during the time when both Judaism and Christianity were defining themselves, and doing so largely in distinction from each other. John's concern was to preach Christ to his readers and also to arm them for debate. Much of the Gospel is polemical, especially in the first twelve chapters. The terms of the polemic are Jewish. No book in the NT shows more familiarity with the terms and methods of rabbinic discussion than John.

Judaism of John's time was not all of one variety, no more than in Jesus' time or in ours. What kind of Judaism does Jesus oppose? According to John, some argue, Jesus (or John) was in conflict with those who used Torah as a weapon to control rather than to liberate, or those who speculated without warrant about the workings of the divine mind, or those who ignored the needy. Various attempts have been made to identify John's (or Jesus') "opponents" with particular groups of Jews for whom there is other evidence characteristic of their teachings. None of these attempts has been generally accepted.

Amid the scholarly debates, it is necessary to affirm two things: (1) Jesus was not rejecting either Jews or Judaism; (2) John does not present Jesus simply as divine, but as fully human. As in the Synoptics, Jesus in the Fourth Gospel opposes those distortions of Judaism that seek in effect to establish rules for God, thus refusing to be open to correction from God's prophets. Jesus reaffirms Torah on every hand. Although "the Jews" again and again are presented as Jesus' opponents, it must be understood that it is the religious establishment, the teachers and leaders of Israel, who are found wanting, and not the people or the religion of Israel.

Jesus' enemies in John's Gospel act not so much legalistically as speculatively, so that the focus is very much on who Jesus is. John is quite clear that Jesus is indeed a real man, however much he is the heavenly messenger. The Passion and Resurrection narratives make that real humanity clear. From the beginning, however, John was seized upon by those who would make Jesus only seem to have been human, and the First Letter of John was written in answer to them (see Chapter Thirty-three). This "docetism," as it is called, is fundamentally incompatible with the incarnational principle that is vital to John and, indeed, to Christianity.

In the opening chapters of the Gospel there also appears to be polemic against an over-exaltation of John the Baptizer (1:6-8, 15, 19-34; 3:22-30). This polemic is more restrained in tone than that against the synagogue, but it is no less clear. Possibly the Christians in John's community found themselves in controversy with a group still looking to the Baptizer as "their" distinctive prophet. At one other place in the New Testament we find a reference to non-Christian followers of the Baptizer (Acts 18:24-19:7); they are located in Ephesus, with which John is traditionally associated.

Prologue: Hymn to the Word 1:1-8

Overture

The Gospel opens with a hymn to the Word (Greek: logos), possibly composed especially for the Gospel, possibly already in use in the community, possibly composed originally in Aramaic. The hymn itself seems to have two insertions, verses 6-8 and 15, both about John the Baptizer. Whatever its origin or earlier circulation, the hymn is a midrash in three parts: on Genesis 1 (vv. 1-5, 9), on the Sinai tradition (vv. 10-13), and on Exodus 33-34 (vv. 14-18). In effect, the insertions are little commentaries on the hymn, which is itself midrashic comment on scripture. This piling up of comments is characteristically Jewish, as is so much in this Gospel.

Why does the Fourth Evangelist begin with this hymn? From the outset, and in agreement with the other three evangelists, John links what we are to be told about

Jesus with the story of salvation history in the Hebrew Scriptures (1:1-12). Where Mark begins with the prophets, Matthew with Abraham, and Luke with Adam, John takes us back behind creation itself. In an obvious midrash on the opening verses of Genesis, John asserts that in Jesus we are met by that same Word through whom was brought into being all that is, and in whom is life, the primal light by which we live (1:1-4). Thus the logos is said to be "pre-existent" in that the Word of creation had an existence before creation itself, as did God.

The word logos was used, in rather different ways, in both Platonism and Stoicism. Greek-speaking readers might have known that special uses of this word were current among some philosophers of that time. But it is the biblical Word of God of which John speaks, not the logos of Greek philosophy. We have only to turn to the first-century writer Philo, who writes at great length about the logos, to see how a Hellenistic Jew who was deeply influenced by Greek philosophy used this word. No Greek-speaking Jew could hear the word logos in a religious context, especially from the mouth of a Jew (like Jesus), and not think "by the word of the Lord the heavens were made" (Ps. 33:6a). The Word of God that created humanity comes back again and again to humanity in Torah's mandates, in the prophets' promise and rebuke, in Wisdom teaching. Wherever the Spirit of God is evident in the world, there is the Word, for there are the conditions under which God created the world.

There is "darkness" in the universe, John says. Its presence is not explained, any more than is the presence of the serpent in Eden (Gen. 3:1). What is important is that darkness has no power over light (1:5). But "the light" must not be confused with the Baptizer, who is a witness sent by God, but no more than that (1:6-8). Presumably others took a different view, but John insists that the Baptizer's commission is limited.

The hymn proclaims that what was happening in Jesus—in "the Christ-event," as it is sometimes called—was the same thing that was happening when God created the world, and the same thing that happens whenever God's word is spoken and heard and obeyed. In Jesus "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (1:9). Nevertheless, the world that belongs to that light ("his own," v. 11) rejects it. Jewish tradition, as exemplified in Sirach 24, had long held that God's Wisdom, God's Torah, was offered

at Sinai to all the nations of the world, but all refused except Israel: “But to all who received him . . . he gave power to become children of God” (1:12). This is the mystery of Israel’s election, which is its special glory. The people of Israel are the people of God because they have received God’s Word; the same Word that created God’s world has created them to be God’s people. AND THE SAME IS TRUE OF JESUS! Jesus is like Israel, and so is anyone who hears the Word of God and obeys it. Such a person then becomes like Jesus, and that person’s life like the creation of the world, when God’s Word was abroad making all things new. The hymn is about “the incarnation,” but it is also about the incarnation of God in Jesus. It is about the incarnation of God in all who are willing to hear it. This is the incarnational principle that enlivens all who live the life of God in the world.

John comes to the climax of his prologue: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14). The word “lived” is more fully translated “dwelt as in a tent” or “tabernacled,” the same word-root as in Revelation 21:3, which says God “will dwell with them as their God” in the new Jerusalem. What Greek-speaking Jew could hear that word and not think of Israel in the wilderness (cf. Exod. 33:7-34)? During the Exodus only Moses experienced “face to face” the “glory” that is the object of mystical aspiration. Yet all believers have seen the “glory” of Jesus, which is the glory of God as God’s Son alone can bear it—“full of grace and truth,” the Greek equivalent of two defining characteristics of God in Hebrew, hesed w’emeth (cf. Exod. 34:6), which “came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). Even Moses did not see God (Exod. 33:20, 23). God’s only Son has now made God known (1:18; the Greek word here is the root of the English word “exegesis”). Yet the repeated “only Son” (1:14, 18) echoes the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:2, 12) and thus speaks to us of one from heaven who, like Isaac, is bound as a sacrifice.

John brings the Redeemer onto the stage as one who is utterly bound to and conjoined with the only God (1:1-5); as one who moves and works through the whole history of the world and of Israel (1:9-13); as one who is compared with and preeminently contrasted to Moses (1:14-17); and as a heavenly figure “close to the Father’s heart” who “has made him [God] known” (1:18). He is one who begins where mystic dreams end.

Narrative Introduction: Witnesses to the Word 1:19-51

The narrative opens when “the Jews” (Greek: Ioudaioi, which can also be translated “Judeans”) send priests and Levites from Jerusalem to question the Baptizer about who he is (1:19). (For what John means by “the Jews,” see “Who were the Ioudaioi?” at the end of Chapter Fourteen.) The Baptizer’s reply is called “witness” or “testimony” (Greek: martyria), and the whole Gospel is one testimony after another. While resembling synoptic accounts, these verses stress the Baptizer’s subordination to Jesus. It never explicitly says (although neither is it denied) that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptizer. Thus the Fourth Evangelist avoids the question of who ought to baptize whom. John also emphasizes the Baptizer’s own testimony to Jesus not only as the one greater than himself who is to come, but also as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29; cf. v. 36).

In the section on the call of the disciples (1:35-51) John adds to the information given in the Synoptics that some of the disciples had been followers of the Baptizer (1:35-37). This clearly suits John’s intention, but it may also be historical. The succession of encounters with individual disciples serves to introduce key (and by the evangelist’s time, traditional) titles of Jesus that will be taken up more fully in the chapters to follow.

Scholars differ greatly over what the evangelist meant by “Lamb of God.” Suggestions include the following: (a) the Passover lamb (Exod. 12:21-27, 43-47); (b) the tamid, the lambs sacrificed daily in the Temple (Exod. 29:38-46); (c) the animal God provided in place of Isaac (Gen. 22); (d) the apocalyptic Lamb, who represents the Messiah and who cleanses his people (Rev. 14:1); (e) the scapegoat of the Day of

Atonement (Lev. 16:21-22). While the last seems to strain credulity (a lamb is not a goat, after all), the evangelist may have had any or all of the other ideas in mind. As we see again and again, Johannine words and phrases and even whole passages often seem ambiguous, very probably because the evangelist intends the text to carry more than one idea or image.

The "Son of Man" image (1:51), as in the Synoptics, is the only phrase used by Jesus to describe himself and is used by no one else of him. It is preceded by the solemn "Truly, truly" (Greek: Amen, Amen) that is typical of the Johannine Jesus at key moments. While "Son of Man" inevitably makes us think of Daniel 7, the "ascending" and "descending" language recalls the story of Jacob in Genesis 28:10-17. John takes Genesis 28:12b to mean that the angels of God were ascending and descending upon him (i.e., Jacob) rather than the ladder (cf. Gen. Rabbah 68.12). Following this interpretation, then, Jesus himself is the angelic way between God and humankind. He is Jacob-Israel, the focus of traffic between earth and heaven, the promise of which sets the tone for the entire Gospel. What John offers is a window into the way in which God's world is being continually visited by God's messengers and at the same time continuously inhabited by God's incarnation.

The Book of Signs

First Sign (Jesus Turns Water into Wine) 2:1-11

Immediately after the key verse promising traffic between earth and heaven (1:51) comes the first in a series of seven "signs" (Greek: semeia), prophetic acts that identify Jesus with the sequence of messengers God sent to Israel over the centuries. These signs are also "mighty acts" or "miracles" showing God's power in Jesus in order to get the attention of the witnesses (both in the text and in the subsequent readership) for what Jesus has to say. In effect, miracles and parables have much the same function: that of a window into the world of God, which Jesus' words then connect to the world of his hearers.

In the wedding story (2:1-12) the "water of the Jews' purifying" is neither rejected nor replaced by the wine that Jesus gives. Through Jesus and through the agency of those who obey his word, the water becomes the wine that Jesus gives. Jesus acts throughout with complete authority. His reply to his mother is not discourteous, but it is firm: "My hour"—the time when Jesus will fulfill God's mission and so glorify God—"has not yet come" (2:4). The enormous quantity of wine produced—about 120 gallons—illustrates the point: that divine generosity exceeds all our possible hopes or needs.

This first sign "revealed his glory" and "his disciples believed in him" (2:11). Signs foreshadow Jesus' glorification by revealing who he is, and that revelation generates believing. The word "believe" harks back to the introduction (1:7, 12, 50) and looks forward to the end of chapter 2 (vv. 22-24).

Jesus in Jerusalem, The " C l e a n s i n g " of the Temple

Jesus' "cleansing" of the Temple occurs in the Synoptics as prelude to the Passion, just after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. John's arrangement is less chronologi- cal than topical and symbolic. Jesus defends his action by quoting Psalm 69:9 (the synoptic accounts use Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11): "Zeal for your house has consumed 2:12-25

me." The "cleansing" is a prophetic act, but not a "miracle" or "sign." What "the Jews" clamor for in 2:18, however, is a "sign" (cf. 6:30). Jesus replies with the functional equivalent of "the sign of the prophet Jonah" in the synoptic tradition (Matt. 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-30; cf. Mark 8:12). "But he was speaking of the

temple of his body" (2:21). He is not threatening the Temple but promising his own Resurrection. This is the prophetic word that interprets the "cleansing."

The Fourth Gospel, unlike the Synoptics, offers an interpretation of Jesus' action in the Temple as symbolic of the meaning of his own life, death, and resurrection. This should make it clear that his action has nothing whatever to do with any attack on the religion of Israel or its religious symbols. Because the action is so often misunderstood in that way, we have placed the conventional word "cleansing" in quotation marks throughout.

The Gospels were written after the Resurrection. They preserve and interpret the words and deeds of Jesus with the lens of faith, through which they look back at all that went before. "After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (2:22). This is the community of memory and belief to which the evangelist and his followers belong.

Many believed because they saw signs (2:23), and throughout the Fourth Gospel this response is challenged by Jesus. "Doubting Thomas" is the final example (20:29). Jesus "would not entrust himself to them" (2:24); here "entrust" is the same word in Greek as "believe" in the preceding verse. Belief, or faith, is a two-way (en)trusting, and the one who knows all people (cf. 16:30) can tell the difference between faith and wonder.

Jesus and Nicodemus: Dialogue, Discourse (Birth), Testimony 3:1-36

Nicodemus (cf. 7:50) may represent many in the synagogue where John's community is debating. They are both attracted to and puzzled by Jesus. Nicodemus begins with an assertion about Jesus that is a compliment, but Jesus shifts the conversation immediately with the second (cf. 1:51) instance of the Gospel's distinctive "very truly" sayings: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (3:3). The word translated "from above" (Greek: anōthen) can also mean "again," as Nicodemus takes it to mean. Jesus presses him to understand that he is talking not about repetition but about revolution. This is the functional equivalent of synoptic sayings like "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3; cf. Mark 10:15).

The reign of God is not a matter of escape. "Very truly, I tell you [once again the formula introduces a statement of particular importance], no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (3:5). "Whence art thou come? From a fetid drop!" said Akabia ben Mahalalel, about 60 BCE (m.'Abot 3.1). In God's ordering, life with its vulnerability and the Spirit with its power belong together—the incarnational principle. Life lived merely on the level of the earthly can produce only more of itself. Only life breathed through by God produces the Spirit-filled life. Yet the Spirit-life is not something to be seized (cf. Phil. 2:6). "The

Spirit" operates like "the wind" (Greek uses the same word for both), going where it will. Being born of the Spirit is like being born of water: both are God's gift. Nicodemus confesses his awe and the insufficiency of his understanding. The theology is impeccable, the system is perfect, but is it true? We look at the glory of the liturgy, we hear the rhetoric of the preacher, and suddenly a voice whispers, "What if it's all nonsense?" And the voice is our own.

Jesus' reply is a characteristic piece of Johannine irony. To be "teacher in Israel" is not enough for Nicodemus or for anyone (3:10). Jesus has become the chief witness about the things of God (3:11). In exactly the same form as Jesus' question in verse 3:12, Rabban Gamaliel is reported to have rebuked the emperor, when the latter claimed to know what God was doing: "You do not know what is on earth, and yet claim to know what is in heaven!" (b. Sanh. 39a) Then the evangelist presents Jesus' credentials to be the

chief witness about the things of God: “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (3:13). It is precisely that kind of testimony that is now available—and has been available all along, as a teacher of Israel ought to know from Deuteronomy 30:11-14 (cf. Rom. 10:5-8). God’s people always have God’s Word/Wisdom/Spirit dwelling with them to teach them; to listen to that teaching is to be born from above.

Unfortunately, ancient Greek manuscripts do not include quotation marks, so we cannot be sure whether Jesus or the evangelist is speaking after verse 12. The rest of the chapter appears to be written from the viewpoint of the church and does not return to the first person “I.”

In verse 3:14 we have a midrash on Numbers 21:9 that functions as a prediction of Jesus’ Passion, the first in a series of three (cf. 8:28; 12:34; see comments above in the introduction to this chapter). Even in Moses’ day “the one who turned toward it was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you, the Savior of all” (Wisd. 16:7). Deliverance comes not by a symbol or by looking, but by the Savior and by believing. Symbol and Savior come together on the cross, made effective by the two-way (en)trusting that is faith(fulness). God entrusts the Son to the world, and the result is the Son’s death. The world and all those in it are invited to entrust themselves to the God who overcame that death and so to enjoy that same life. The passage echoes the binding of Isaac (cf. Gal. 2:20b; Rom. 8:32).

The next verse uses “sending” for the first time in John to describe the relationship of Jesus to God. Such words recur frequently (e.g., 3:34; 4:34; 5:23, 36; 6:38-39, 44; 7:16), and biblical parallels are obvious: Moses (Exod. 3:10-15; 4:13, 28; 5:22; 7:16) and the prophets (e.g., Isa. 6:8; Jer. 1:7; Ezek. 2:3-4). “Sending” was a common way of speaking about divine inspiration for the Greeks. For example, the philosophical “missionary” (literally the “sent one”) Diogenes was sent by God (Epictetus, Dissertations 1.24.6). The rabbinic literature is replete with further examples. For the rabbis an agent is functionally equivalent to the one who sent him or her in relation to the agent’s commission. This is a legal idea and does not imply spiritual or mystical union between agent and sender. When John uses the idea of agency

to describe Jesus’ relationship to God, he intends us to understand a much closer relationship, one that Barnabas Lindars calls “moral union,” the identity of wills between Father and Son (1971, 69-70). The Baptizer is also God’s agent, but his commission is much more limited.

The remainder of the section (3:18-21) develops the notion of judgment in terms of our reaction to “the light,” one of the themes of the prologue (1:9-11). Once more the terminology is legal. Some scholars have suggested that John’s legal language implies legal proceedings between God and the world, so that verses 3:18-21 might stand as a preliminary statement for the prosecution.

In what follows (3:22-36) we find a record of the kind of adjustment that had to occur between followers of Jesus and followers of John the Baptizer, not unlike that in Matthew 11:2-19//Luke 7:18-35. Both are “Wisdom’s children” (Luke 7:35); both bear the same witness to God. But only one (Jesus) has had all things placed in his hands (John 3:35), an idea rapidly developed and proclaimed in the early church (cf. Col. 1:15-20). Finally it is God who testifies about God, and whoever does not believe and obey the agent-witness is subject to the wrath of God (3:36; cf. Deut. 31:29).

In the case of Jesus, however, the relationship between sender and agent is not merely a legal one but one of love (3:16, 35). The Father sends not just an agent but a Son, and we are reminded of the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-10). The Son is obedient to the Father, just as the beloved Isaac was obedient to Abraham. One thinks of Jesus’ prayer of thanksgiving in Matthew 11:25-27 that sounds so “Johannine.” The motive for obedience is love, and so is the motive for sending a Son.

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: Dialogue, Discourse (Water), Testimony 4:1-46a

The protracted dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman ends the long section between Jesus' first (2:1-11) and second signs (4:46b-54). Interestingly, this dialogue returns to the theme of water and what one is to drink. Like the Nicodemus story, it ends by generating further witness to who Jesus is.

While the relationship between first-century Jews (Ioudaioi, "Judeans") and Samaritans (people from Samaria, to the north of Judea, whose traditions differed markedly from those of "the Jews") was not always as negative as tradition has held, Samaritans were often looked down on as if they were Gentiles. A decree of ca. 65 CE stated that, from the point of view of the laws of purity, "the daughters of the Samaritans are menstruants from their cradle" (m. Nid. 4:1). Thus an observant Jewish man (like Jesus) would have nothing to do with a Samaritan woman.

This decree was enacted on the eve of the revolt against Rome by that famous synod of Hillelites and Shammaites, in which the extreme zealots among the latter were in the majority and passed a large number of chauvinistic measures. As late as the end of the century, bitter words could be exchanged between followers of the various parties about this episode and its consequences; and as the moderates gained the upper hand, the day when the synod had met came to be regarded as a day of calamity for the nation (Daube 1956, 373). The rationale for the decree was apparently that because Samaritan purity rules differed in some ways from Pharisaic ones, there was

always the possibility of a Samaritan woman being ritually unclean. No doubt this view had long prevailed in more rigid circles even before it was given legal force. Against this background the point of John 4:1-42 becomes obvious. On the one hand the passage seems to assert the validity of Jewish tradition against Samaritans, yet the whole passage reads like a deliberate polemic against the anti-Samaritan decree, especially given the positive response of the Samaritans to Jesus (4:39-42).

Like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman takes what Jesus says to her in a literal sense (4:11) and confesses incredulity (4:12). Then Jesus begins to indicate the deeper sense of his words and sends her to get her husband. His knowledge of her domestic situation makes her wary but confirms her sense of who he is: a prophet. She then tests the prophet against what she has been taught (4:20) and is driven to think of Messiah, to which Jesus says, "I am he" (4:26), which suggests but is not quite yet the distinctive "I am" saying that occurs frequently in John. Because Jesus knows her and knows God, she brings her neighbors, who believe because of his word (4:41-42). Jesus is ultimately the effective witness, but the woman's testimony has brought the people to hear him.

Just as the woman has misunderstood about the water, so the disciples misunderstand about the food (4:31-38)—both being the sort of misunderstanding that helps the evangelist tell the story. The food theme is thus introduced; its full treatment comes in chapter 6.

The report of Jesus' Galilean welcome (4:43-45) is double-edged, for it comes about "since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival" (4:45), presumably referring to the "cleansing" of the Temple. What Jesus does is not the point. It is what he says, and who he is, that leads people to believe.

Second Sign (Jesus Heals the Official's Son) 4:46b-54

Returning to Cana, Jesus encounters a royal official (Greek: *basilikos*) whose son is near death and who begs Jesus to heal him. "Unless you [plural] see signs and wonders you [plural] will not believe," Jesus replies (4:48), and we think of his response to the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:27 (cf. Matt. 15:26). Both that woman and this official persist in appealing to Jesus. This story of healing is parallel to the healing of the

centurion's slave (doulos) in Luke 7:1-10; interestingly, the parallel in Matthew 8:5-13 calls the patient a pais, which can be translated either "servant" or "son." Regardless of details, this is the kind of story that was being repeated about Jesus in several different circles as our Gospels were being put together.

The Gentile centurion in Luke is defended by his Jewish neighbors who support his plea to Jesus for healing. It is not clear whether the basilikos in John 4:46 was a Jew or a Gentile; what is clear is that Jesus rebukes people [plural] who would accept him as a wonder-worker and attempt a leap to faith from that inadequate basis. What elicits faith from the basilikos is Jesus' word, his promise that the man's son will live.

Third Sign **(Jesus Heals the Lame Man) 5:1-47**

As in the Synoptics, healing on the Sabbath (5:1-16) is a cause of controversy, but the debate takes a turn that reflects John's special interests (5:17-47). Jesus defends his action by appealing to the rabbinic argument that the Sabbath is not broken by God's continual creating and judging. "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (4:17). They sought to kill him, John says, not only as a Sabbath-breaker but also as one who "was also calling God his own Father." The scandal of this statement is hard to hear from a Christian devotional tradition, thus it is vital to read on: "thereby making himself equal to God" (5:18). This is the key verse to the section, which in its entirety is a response to that accusation.

Some of those whom the rabbis called minim ("sectaries" or "heretics") were perceived to be teaching that there were "two powers in heaven." It is impossible to be sure whom the rabbis had in mind when they made this charge, or what the sectaries taught, since the rabbis did not believe in "giving a mouth to Satan" by explaining the arguments of their opponents. Nonetheless, granted that the attacks were made, Christianity is an obvious possible candidate. The rabbis did not object to the idea of more than one heavenly being, for they, too, told stories about angels. They objected to the notion that any heavenly being could exercise independent authority. When the rabbis raise questions about "two powers in heaven," they are essentially objecting to the idea of "two authorities," which they see as a betrayal of the unity of God. John 5:19-47 seems to read as a rebuttal of such a charge. It is significant that as far as "making himself equal to God" is concerned, Jesus does not actually deny the charge (cf. 1:13; 5:21-23). What he does deny is the notion of his independent authority. Legally, an agent must carry out his or her mission in accordance with the wishes of the sender: "Very truly, I tell you [the emphatic formula again], the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (5:19; cf. 5:30). Hence "anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (5:23b). The intent may be to echo Daniel 7:13-14. Jesus is the Son of Man to whom everlasting dominion is given, extending even to the divine prerogative of resurrection of the dead.

Finally, the argument moves back to forensic terms and in particular to the qualifications of a witness. Uncorroborated witness to oneself was not considered reliable by the rabbis. But there are others who bear witness to Jesus, in particular the Baptizer (5:33-35), Jesus' own works (5:36), the Father (5:37), and the Scriptures (5:46). When God spoke to the Israelites at Sinai, they "heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deut. 4:12). By contrast, Jesus tells his opponents, "You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent" (5:37b-38a). Is the argument circular? Of course, as the arguments of faith always are, for they depend on seeing with the eyes of faith. (See 1 John 5:7-10 for a return to the same argument by a teacher in the Johannine tradition, as discussed in Chapter Thirty-three.) Concerning the witness of scripture, Jesus says, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life" (5:39). In the Christian view, the Scriptures themselves bear witness to Jesus (5:39), but the study of scripture must

be undertaken in faith; the student of scripture must have the love of God (5:42) and not be deceived by false witnesses (5:43). This is the controversy that Jesus will pursue with leaders of the Jewish religious establishment until the end. If they knew what they ought to know and claim to know of Torah, they would recognize Jesus for who he is. Their failure to do so undermines their claims to knowledge and hence to leadership.

Fourth Sign **(Jesus Feeds The Multitude) 6:1-15**

The story of Jesus' feeding the five thousand is the only "miracle" told in all four Gospels (Matt. 14:13-21//Mark 6:32-44//Luke 9:10b-17//John 6:1-15). In addition, Matthew (15:32-39) and Mark (8:1-10) tell another story of Jesus' feeding four thousand. The story's significance in John lies in the discourse it introduces, the most striking one in the Book of Signs. Once again (cf. 2:1-11) Jesus demonstrates God's generosity, not just God's power.

Fifth Sign **(Jesus Walks on Water) 6:16-21**

The "Mosaic" features in the story are not unintentional. Jesus is on the mountain, sitting with his disciples, a teaching setting reminiscent of Moses (cf. Matt. 5:1; 17:1; 28:16). Passover, the festival of God's redemption through Moses, is near (6:4). The crowd has followed Jesus into the wilderness, where he feeds them, a clear reminiscence of the manna experience (Exod. 16). The crowd declares, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (6:14), meaning a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15-18). Finally, the crowd would make Jesus a king (6:15); according to Philo, Moses was "named god and king of the whole nation" (Moses 1.158) and was "king, law-giver, high priest, prophet" (*Moses* 2.292).

Jesus and the Jews: Dialogue, Discourse (Bread) 6:22-59

The disciples cross the sea, and Jesus, again like Moses, shows his mastery of the waters (6:16-21). He shows once again his discernment that some flock to him, not for the word of God, but for the food he brings. As with water in chapter 4, so it is with food in chapter 6: the eternal is to be sought, not the temporal. When his hearers ask him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answers, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (6:28-29). Once again they ask for a sign, and they bring up manna in the wilderness—amazingly, since they have just been fed! Then Jesus says it was God, not Moses, who provided "the true bread from heaven" (6:32), which they then ask to have "always," just as the Samaritan woman asks for water so that she will never again have to return to the well (4:15).

Jesus and the Jews: Dialogue, Discourse (Bread) 6:22-59

A midrashic debate based on Exodus 16 and Isaiah 54:9-55:5 follows, with probable allusions to Genesis 3. Exodus 16 is the account of the giving of the manna, and some evidence suggests that the Isaiah and Genesis passages may have been read in the lectionary near the time of Passover.

An alternative pointing, which indicates different vowels in the Hebrew text of Psalm 78:24 and Exodus 16:15, is possible and alters the meaning, Jesus uses this alternative to assert that this bread is not a thing of the past but is being given now: "Give us this day our daily bread," the Christian recalls. When his hearers ask for this bread "always," Jesus replies as the divine Word and Wisdom: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35; cf. Isa. 55:1-2).

For Jesus to assert that God provided eternal bread, or that Jesus himself provided it as God's agent, is one thing. For Jesus to assert that he himself is that bread is quite another. This is the first of the "I am" sayings in

John, and each of them brings up major themes in scripture and Jewish tradition. Jesus transforms each of these themes by predicating them of himself—bread, light, door, shepherd, resurrection, life, way, truth, vine. What "is" means in each of them has been debated almost as much by Christians through the centuries as "is" in the eucharistic words "This is my body" and "This is my blood." Significantly, John's account of the Last Supper has no such "eucharistic words," just as John has no Transfiguration story. Jesus is who he is all the way through, as anyone with the eyes of faith can see.

Where the "eucharistic words" come in John is just here, 6:51-58. Like the Israelites in the wilderness who were "forced" to eat manna from heaven, Jesus' hearers bridle at the thought of his body and blood providing heavenly nourishment. They object, on the grounds of what they think they know of Jesus' natural parentage, to Jesus' claim that he has "come down from heaven" (6:42). But a heavenly claim can only be proved by heavenly witness at divine initiative: "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" (6:44a) and so brought to that place where the Son "will raise that person up on the last day" (6:44b). To be fed by God, one must be taught by God—John's functional equivalent of the synoptic story of Jesus' response when he is tempted to turn stones into bread (Matt. 4:3-4//Luke 4:3-4). John has no temptation story, for Jesus is tempted all the way through the Fourth Gospel to be someone other than who he is.

Jesus and His Disciples: Dialogue, Testimony, Division 6:60-71

According to Matthew (16:17) Peter is told when he makes his confession at Caesarea Philippi that God is the teacher of God's people (Isa. 54:13), just as in the Synoptics (cf. Matt. 11:27//Luke 10:22). John's equivalent to that story comes after Jesus has indicated the division lurking even in his inner circle: the basic division of flesh and spirit, the division between those who believe and those who do not. Many turn away because of these difficult sayings, but the Twelve stay with him. Peter answers Jesus' question, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter says, perhaps resignedly, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (6:67-69).

End of chapter

>

Greek drama? Opera?back

Or one might think of it as the unique piece of work that it is.

>

Not all of one varietyback

And of course also true of Christianity.

>

Speculatively not legalistically[back]

Can someone help me as to what this means?

>

"dwelt in a tent" back

True. You could actually translate it as "pitched its tent," or "encamped."

>

Amenback

To be clear, the word "Amen" is actually Hebrew

>

Not discourteous[back]

Well, maybe a little. Per Randall's sermon, he may have felt his mother was interfering. γύναι, "woman," was actually the polite form of address to a woman whose name you don't know. Sometimes translated as "Madam."

>

"from above" back

Actually ἄνωθεν really means "from above," with "again" as a very secondary meaning. Its commotation is similar to "from the top" in music. Funny how the same ideas surface in different languages.

>

The same wordback

As do we. Think "respiration."

>

Isaac obedient[back]

Well, he was tied up, wasn't he? Did Abraham say "Hold still a minute, while I tie you up?" or did he somehow overpower Isaac? Amy-Jill Levine wonders if Isaac might have been defective in some respect. He never goes anywhere, or does anything much. And note the midrash about Isaac never speaking (at least to Abraham) after the sacrifice episode. I don't think I would have either.

>

Meeting at the well[back]

Amy-Jill Levine (primarily a New Testament scholar in spite of being Jewish) points out that many Old Testament heroes met their wives at a well, where they helped them draw water. She suggests that any first-century Jewish reader of this passage would have seen it as a hilarious parody of such stories.

>

Daughters of the Samaritansback

Nasty!

>

Cleansing the templeback

Yes, but when did he do it? If he did it, then was able to leave Jerusalem, than matters enormously.

>

Servant or sonback

In not-quite-contemporary English, "boy."

>

Circular arguments[back]

So why bother? Speaking only for myself, it's because I feel that I have experienced God in some way, and so have a small measure of faith.

>