

An account of the Gospel of John

“Jesus says,
“you must
love your
neighbour”

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When you look at the Gospel account of Mark, it is just a collection of reminiscences. I would compare it to a slideshow.

When Matthew took the material from Mark, he went through everything and told about Jesus according to prophecy, so Matthew is uniquely a Jewish look at Jesus. Luke did the opposite. He took Mark and looked at it specifically for the Gentiles and he emphasizes those things that deal with miracles.

John's account is uniquely written to a Christian community - not as Jewish, not as Gentile, not as Greek. That is one of the reasons why I think most people today actually prefer this account.

When the account of John was written, there were two major things going on in the Church. One of the first challenges was dealing with the Gnostics, who believed they had special knowledge of Jesus. The Gnostics taught that the longer you were a Christian the more you got this special knowledge. The Church has always condemned this claim of the Gnostics.

The true key to understanding Jesus has to do with a deeper understanding of what he said. Jesus says, “you must love your neighbor”. If my faith is shallow, “loving my neighbor” may mean that I simply try to get along with others. However, if my faith is deeper, “loving my neighbour” may mean seeking out people who have problems so that I can help them.

Rather than receiving a new truth by deeper faith, you get a better understanding of exactly what Jesus said. It is not a matter of being a Christian for 50 years and then someone slips you the Gospel about Mary Magdalene. It does not work that way. There is no special reward. The key to being Christian is the depth of meaning.

Another one of the Gnostics' major teachings was that your body and soul are disconnected. They claimed that it does not matter what your body does as long as your soul remains in harmony with God. Some people had all kinds of sin in their lives and the Gnostics said it should be ignored. They directed people to keep their souls pure, and that it did not matter if their bodies went to hell.

The second challenge to the Church at the time of the account of John was the question of the Lordship of Jesus. This was the first time when there was actually a rise in the questioning. Biblically-speaking, this question to the Lordship of Jesus was a theological challenge. Today, the divinity of Jesus is questioned; whether or not he was truly God. Therefore, the account of John emphasizes the idea that of faith being demonstrated in the way the believer lives. John will also emphasize the fact that Jesus is, in fact, Lord. So, those are the two main things to notice throughout the Gospel account of John.

The time of authorship is probably at the turn of the century, around the year 100AD or 120AD. Most people would say that the author of the account is not the apostle John, although it is obvious from the content that this account is written from the perspective of the preaching and teaching of the apostle John. The Gospel of John, chapter one, verse one says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God.”

When I was studying Theology in Ottawa, the head of the Department, had done his Ph.D. thesis on the Gospel account of John. He maintained that the Gospel of John is divided into seven sections. Most people already know that but he maintained that the seven sections correspond to the seven days of creation. The particular thing you initially see in the first day is a huge mention of light. Then you go on to the next, through all the days of creation. When I was studying at Berkeley, the head of the Department of Theology had gotten his doctorate maintaining that the Gospel account of John is founded on the seven feasts of the Jewish year. He went through the feasts in sequence and showed how all the different miracles are tied to that.

When I was studying in San Diego, the head of the Theology Department had

gotten his Ph.D. with the account of John, maintaining that it dealt with either the Eucharist or with Baptism. He showed that every single miracle and everything you see throughout this Gospel account deals with bread, fish, water, or wine. He said the account opens with the first sign of Jesus, the turning of water into wine, and that the last thing you see in John's account is the spear run into Jesus. The water from the first sign has become the water of Baptism that flows out of the heart of Jesus. The wine from the first miracle has become the blood of the Eucharist that flows out of the heart of Jesus. Out of Jesus' heart flow blood and water just as Jesus' ministry began with wine and water.

The reason why I mention these theories is an example of the complexity of John's account. It is very much like French pastry, with as many layers as you bother to look at. If you were to ask me which one of the professors is right, I actually believe they are all right. I believe that all those themes were present in John's mind when this was written. The nature of John's account is very, very complex.

When dealing with the account of John, never think in terms of either/or. If you see 25 meanings in a text, John probably wrote 25 meanings into the text.

I will show you just one at the beginning. The first page of Genesis reads...

In the Beginning

On the other hand, if you were to write this in Greek, which is the first page of John's account...

In the Beginning

Hebrew reads one direction and Greek reads the other direction. So, John has specifically begun his account with the same words of Genesis but in the opposite direction. And why? This would be like an ink blot. If you put an ink blot, it forms a butterfly.

In the Beginning

Remember that the butterfly was the first symbol of the resurrection. In the first line of his account, John actually tells you the resurrection already. He means it to play against Genesis “in the beginning”.

That is of the nature of this account. If you were to study this account with someone else, the other person may never mention a single thing I say. If you could interview John, he would probably say he meant both of them. Again, this is very complex. Therefore, “in the beginning was the Word.”

For the Greeks, there are causes that bring about things. I will use this podium as an example. What are the causes of this podium? In other words, what brings it about? The first cause is the metal; it is made out of metal. The Greeks called that the material cause. The second thing is that it takes the form of a podium. The Greeks called this the formal cause. There is also an exemplary cause. An exemplary cause is what was in the mind of the person when he decided to put the podium together. For the

Greeks, what is in your mind before anything happens is the word. The word is the exemplary cause. As you study a dictionary, a word actually defines something. So, if I say “table,” I have said something already defined. It may have one leg or it may have twenty legs. It may be big or small. If you decide to go to the market, you have in your mind what you are going to get. If you decide to clean house, you have in your mind what it will look like when it is clean. There is the word, the thing that brings about your doing it.

So for the Greeks, the exemplary cause is this Word. The Word is in the beginning of everything. Now John says, “in the beginning.” In Genesis, “in the beginning” does not mean cosmic beginning. It means our beginning, because you know this is not a beginning for God. When we study the Scriptures, we discover God always was. We discover that He created angels. We discover angels had a fight and a group of them ended up in hell. We realise all of this happened before “in the beginning” actually refers to creation. “In the beginning” is the beginning of our universe, not God's beginning.

John says, “In the beginning was the Word.” He is telling us something here and we will see a lot more of this in the account. Before God did anything, what was in His mind was Jesus Christ. When God looked at Jesus Christ, He said that He needed to create a world where Jesus could live. The reason why we have the temperature we do is because it is the temperature at which Jesus would live. The reason why we have the mixture of oxygen and everything we have in our air is because God created what Jesus was going to breathe. Everything in our world was created as a setting for Jesus.

John's view of creation, in his account, is very much like a husband and wife who are preparing a nursery for a baby. They prepare the nursery for a baby that is not born yet. They decide how the nursery is going to be set up and everything that is needed. The mother goes to the hospital and the couple brings the baby home to the nursery. This is what John is saying. God is setting up a nursery for His Son and you and I are the beneficiaries of this. So the beginning is the Word and the Word was turned toward God. God is looking at the Word to create the universe, but the Word is looking back at the Father.

The Father and the Son are looking at one another and in this the Father is going to create the world and Jesus in this world. Jesus will remain looking at the Father for how he goes in the world, how he moves in the world, and what he does in the world; because it is the Father's world.

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Editor's Note:

If you want more of the excellent teaching make sure you register for the January Seminar where Fr Jim will be teaching along with Fr Vella, OFM Conv.



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