

Looking at the Book of John

Welcome to the Gospel of John! Writing in the late first century, John addresses a group of Jewish and Gentile Christians during a time when the church was under significant persecution. It is the story of the Word becoming flesh—the divine becoming human, offering eternal life through believing in Him.

The Gospel of John provides a truly unique contribution to the life of God's people. While the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (referred to as the "Synoptic" Gospels, which means "seen together") have very similar structures, timelines, and details, John stands alone as simply "the fourth Gospel." Indeed, John has been referred to as a "maverick" among the four Gospels.

Some things to look for in John:

- **Belief in Jesus as the Central Theme.** Toward the end of the book, the author makes his purpose clear: "These are written, so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31, NRSV). The theme of belief weaves its way through the entire book and is a critical part of its theology. Two thousand years later, the intent is still the same: that the readers and hearers of this gospel might come to believe in Jesus as the Christ.
- **Narrative Structure:** John is a much more story-centered gospel than the Synoptics. Most of the theological points are grounded in the story of the three-year ministry of Jesus. In John, we don't find as many of the teaching moments of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7), for example, has no parallel in John. Rather, Jesus' teachings in John nearly always happen as He interacts with the other people in the story. Even the lengthy discourse in chapters 14—16 is meant to be understood in the context of the Last Supper.

Within this narrative structure, we find many metaphors and symbols at play. Jesus refers to himself as "the life," "the door," "the good shepherd," "the bread of life," and "the lamb of God." Many of the elements of a good story are to be found here. And when we understand that this is the Story of the Savior of the world, they communicate in a profoundly meaningful way.

- **Christology and Pneumatology:** John lays out very im-

portant ideas concerning the identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. In chapter 1, the gospel presents Jesus as the "word" who became flesh. The author spends the rest of the book explaining what it truly means for Jesus to be the Christ. This type of theology is called "Christology."

John also contributes to "Pneumatology," or theology of the Holy Spirit. Particularly in chapters 14—16, the gospel discusses the presence and actions of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. John is a very Trinitarian book because its theology reflects Father, Son, and Spirit.

- **"I am" Statements:** Many places in the gospel, Jesus begins a conversation with "I am," then ties a familiar image like shepherd, light, bread, etc., to it. At least seven times, Jesus begins a lengthy discourse with that phrase. His first-century hearers would not have missed the significance of that choice of words. Indeed, it is the name God gives for himself in Exodus 3:14-15. The "I am" statements of Jesus tie Him directly to the God who reveals himself in the Old Testament, and are an important part of John's Christology.
- **Dualism:** Several classic literary devices are found in John, the most striking of which is dualism. Various symbols and ideas that are in conflict with each other appear throughout John. In chapter 1, we find the conflict between light and darkness. Jesus later continues the theme, saying "I am the light of the world" (9:5). The image of light and darkness communicates powerfully the hope that Jesus brings to a lost and broken world. Some other dualisms in John include spirit vs. flesh, life vs. death, heaven vs. earth, truth vs. lie, and believers vs. the world.

One point the fourth gospel makes very clear is that eternal life is available to all who believe in Jesus for salvation (3:16). There can be no doubt that the writer wants all who read this book, then and now, to hear the call to faith and come to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [they] may have life in His name."

MARK HENDRICKSON

Mark is Co-Pastor of Restoration Community the Church of the Nazarene in Muncie, IN.