THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

Since the late 2nd cent., Jn’s Gospel has been symbolised by the eagle, presumably because its theological thought soars so high.

- It has also been known as the “spiritual” Gospel. That description has various meanings.
- Jn’s Gospel presents Jesus in his person & teaching as the revealer & the revelation of God, & so as the foundation of every sound Christian spirituality.
- Throughout its story of Jesus, this Gospel challenges readers to be on the side of the “spirit” as opposed to that of the “flesh.”
- It speaks to a community of believers (the church) who are animated & guided by the Holy Spirit.

Unlike Mt, Mk & Lk, in the lectionary of Scripture texts for Sundays there is no separate year dedicated to Jn’s Gospel. Instead, selections from Jn’s Gospel appear most prominently in the seasons of Lent & Easter in all the cycles, both Sundays & weekdays. Passages from Jn are also included in the Christmas season & in Ordinary Time. The idea seems to be Jn provides spiritual depth to the most important moments in the liturgical unfolding of Jesus’ life, death & resurrection.

In the NT we meet St. John (traditionally identified as John the son of Zebedee) primarily through the Gospel that bears his name. This is probably not the same person who wrote Revelation (also named John) or the 3 letters in John’s name (known as “the Elder”), though there are links between all these writings. Even with Jn’s Gospel we are more likely dealing with a complex tradition, school or circle that developed over many years than with a single author working totally on his own.

The Evangelist & His Gospel

Jn’s Gospel is different from the others. The Synoptic Gospels give a “common viewpoint” (synopsis) about Jesus. But apart from the account of Jesus’ suffering, death & resurrection, almost everything in Jn’s Gospel is missing from the Synoptics & vice versa. According to Jn:

- much of Jesus’ public ministry takes place in Jerusalem & Judea rather than in Galilee.
- In Jn, Jesus’ public career spans 3 Passover celebrations (cf 2:13; 6:4; 11:55) & thus three years, instead of one year.
Jn presents a different cast of characters, including Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, Lazarus, Philip, the beloved disciple & Thomas.

The focus of Jesus’ preaching is the revelation of his heavenly Father & his own identity as the definitive revealer of God, while the kingdom of God which is so prominent in the Synoptics, is in the background.

Jn’s Jesus gives long speeches instead of the short units (parables, controversies, proverbs etc.) found in the Synoptics.

Jesus (rather than the Jewish Law) is the definitive expression of God’s will for his people.

Jesus’ status as the pre-existent Son of God, as “I am” & as divine (1:1; 20:28) goes beyond what is said about him in the other Gospels.

**Behind John’s Gospel**

In the Christian tradition the John of Jn’s Gospel has been identified as John the son of Zebedee, a fisherman who was among the first disciples called by Jesus. He appears in all the lists of apostles, & in Mk 3:17 John & his brother James are called “Sons of Thunder.” At several points in the Gospels he appears in the inner circle of Jesus’ followers, alongside his brother James & Peter, & at some very important events such as Jesus’ transfiguration & his prayer in Gethsemane. Paul puts John among the “pillar apostles” at Jerusalem (Gal 2:9) after Jesus’ Resurrection.

But it’s difficult to discern the precise role of John the son of Zebedee in the composition of the Gospel that bears his name.

- Did he actually write this Gospel as it now stands?
- Or did he make available his reminiscences of Jesus?
- Was he like the patron saint of the distinctive faith community that came to be identified with him & his teachings about Jesus – what scholars now call the Johannine community?
- Was he the founder of the Johannine school or circle?

Unfortunately we can’t answer these questions with certainty. Perhaps the most important point of all is that those who produced this Gospel traced their tradition back to the circle of Jesus’ first followers, which included John the son of Zebedee.

At several points Jn’s Gospel appeals to the testimony of someone who was close to the earthly Jesus & is called “the one whom Jesus loved” (Jn 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7). There are also references to “another disciple”
(18:15) & “the other disciple” (20:2, who is further identified as “the one whom Jesus loved”). The reference to “the two disciples” in 1:37 suggests this person may once have been a follower of John the Baptist. Whether any or all of these figures is John the son of Zebedee is not clear, though it’s certainly tempting to view them as one & the same character.

On some historical matters where Jn’s Gospel differs from the other Gospels, Jn is often correct & so conveys solid historical tradition. E.g.:
- it’s more likely that Jesus’ public ministry lasted for 3 years rather than one.
- Jesus probably did visit Jerusalem more than once.
- Jesus may well have been crucified before the Passover festival began, rather than on the first day of the official Passover celebration.

Also, many of the geographical references in Jn’s Gospel are accurate & suggest some first-hand acquaintance with these places.

Nevertheless, Jn’s Gospel can’t be taken simply as the eye-witness report of John the son of Zebedee or the beloved disciple. It’s better understood as the product of the long reflection on Jesus that was carried on in a distinctively Johannine community for over 50 years & that reached its final form c.85 or 90 AD, perhaps at Ephesus. John the son of Zebedee or the one known as the beloved disciple may have been the founder of this school or community in Palestine, which was made up largely of Jewish Christians.

After the destruction of Jerusalem & its temple in 70 AD, all Jews (including Christian Jews) had to redefine their Judaism. In this crisis of identity, the exalted claims made by the Johannine Christians about Jesus led to a strained relationship with other Jews & even expulsion from their synagogues.

In the late 1st cent., the Gospel in the form much as we have it today took shape. But it represents the literary & theological activity of the Johannine school over many years. It provides both a statement of that community’s beliefs about Jesus & a defence against the criticisms made by outsiders. Further developments in the life of the Johannine community can be glimpsed in the Johannine epistles (1-3 Jn).

So Johannine Christianity began as a movement within Judaism & faced its most severe crisis when its followers were being expelled from Jewish synagogues in the late 1st cent. (cf 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). How Jesus fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures is a major concern in the Gospel. From ch.5 on, Jn’s
Gospel traces Jesus’ activities by reference to major feasts in the Jewish calendar.

There is no doubt that Jesus & his first followers were Jews. The Gospel is written in a Semitic style of Greek. As the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls has shown, its vocabulary & style are not at all foreign to Palestine in the 1st cent. The Johannine Christians probably saw themselves as practising a more perfect form of Judaism than their ancestors & rivals did. Non-Jewish observers would have seen the Johannine Christians as a movement within Judaism.

Given the long & complex development of Jn’s Gospel, it’s possible & necessary to read it at several different levels. It is first & foremost the story of Jesus’ public ministry & death in the early 1st cent. (27-30 AD). But it also uses the stories about Jesus to cast light on the crises faced by the Johannine community in its later history, especially as it separated from the synagogue. These stories were expanded & adapted over the years to provide advice for new situations, just as they have been used in church life over the centuries.

As the Dead Sea scrolls & other ancient Jewish texts have shown, many Jews in the 1st cent., while acknowledging the supreme authority of God, divided reality into two powers & two camps. The children of light do the deeds of light under the leadership of the Angel of Light. The children of darkness do the deeds of darkness under the leadership of the Prince of Darkness. In the end, at the divine “visitation”, the children of light will be vindicated & rewarded, while the children of darkness will be condemned & punished. This Jewish form of dualism found its way into earliest Christianity & received one of its strongest expressions in Jn’s Gospel. There are no shades of grey in dualistic thinking. It is at the root of the many negative comments about “the world” & about “the Jews” in Jn’s Gospel.

In Jn’s Gospel, the chief opponents of Jesus & his followers are identified as “the Jews.” They generally appear in a negative way – as Jesus’ opponents in debate, as his persecutors, & as the ones who convince Pontius Pilate to have Jesus executed. Because Jesus & John & other early Christians were Jews, these hostile “Jews” do not represent all of Israel; they are a group within Israel.

There seems to be an equation or identification between the opponents of Jesus in the early 1st cent. & the opponents of the Johannine community in the late 1st cent. The so-called anti-Jewish elements reflect the situation
in which Johannine Christians were being excluded from the synagogues & were engaged in a struggle against “the Jews” who dominated those synagogues & contested the Christian claim to be the people of God.

**Literary Features**

Jn’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus’ public ministry:
- how he gathered disciples,
- performed “signs” (miracles),
- taught about God & himself,
- instructed his disciples on how to carry on the movement he began,
- was arrested & executed,
- appeared to his disciples as alive again.

It’s customary to divide Jn’s Gospel into two large parts:
- the **Book of Signs** (chs 1-12)
- the **Book of Glory** (chs 13-20 [21]).

After ch.1 (which introduces us to who Jesus is), chs 2-12 traces Jesus’ public activities in Galilee & Judea over a three year period during which Jesus performs miracles (“signs”) & gives long discourses about his heavenly Father & his role in revealing him. Next in chs 13-17, at his Last Supper, Jesus bids his closest followers farewell, & instructs them on how to continue the movement he has begun. The passion narrative in chs 18-20 constitutes the “hour” of Jesus in which his apparent defeat issuing in his arrest, suffering, & death is transformed into a triumph through his resurrection, exaltation & return to his heavenly Father. Ch.21, which may be a later addition to the Gospel, gives another resurrection appearance & ties up some loose ends about the fates of Peter & the beloved disciple.

Jn’s story of Jesus is highly dramatic. His portrait of Jesus makes his hero into an attractive figure, especially when he is played against his disciples & his opponents.

The Gospel as a whole has a certain tragic movement as Jesus approaches his death. Individual episodes mix story, dialogue, & teaching to achieve literary variety. Jesus always expresses himself in an elevated way as befits God’s Son. He enters into debates & conflicts with “the Jews”. Their misunderstandings (& those of his own disciples) allow him to explain & clarify who he is & how he relates to God as his heavenly Father. At the end of each episode, Jesus emerges as both wise & noble.
The Evangelist uses various literary devices:

- **Misunderstanding**: someone misses Jesus’ point, & he has to explain further
- **Double meaning**: play on words that can mean two things; e.g. “again” & “from above” in 3:3-10
- **Irony**: the reader grasps the deeper meaning that eludes the speaker; cf 11:50
- **Chiastic or concentric structures**: parallel ideas or terms pivoting around a central idea
- **Symbolic language**: Jesus as the “Lamb of God”
- **Inclusion**: beginning & ending in the same way, as in 1:1 & 20:28 where Jesus is called “God.”

Despite the literary skill evident in Jn’s Gospel, there are some peculiar features & apparent inconsistencies.

- At the end of ch.5, Jesus is in Jerusalem, but at the start of ch.6, he seems to be in Galilee.
- After hiding from the crowds in 12:36, Jesus speaks in public again in 12:44.
- At the end of ch.14, he commands the disciples, “Rise, let us be on our way” but stays around for three more chapters until 18:1.
- Much of the content in 13:31-14:31 is repeated in 16:4-33.
- The Gospel seems to end at 20:30-31, only to start up again in ch.21 & reach a second conclusion in 21:25.

One way to account for the occasional literary unevenness is to assume the Evangelist &/or the community behind him incorporated various oral or written sources into the narrative.

- The Prologue seems to have fragments of an early Christian hymn.
- The long speeches, especially the farewell discourses in chs 13-17, probably were in circulation before the final composition of the Gospel.
- The passion narrative, though similar at times to the other Gospels, appears to have originated as an independent story, at least in part.
- The idea that these traditional sources were developed in the Johannine school helps explain some of the awkwardness that remains in the text of Jn’s Gospel.
Theological Significance

Toward the end of Jn’s Gospel, the Evangelist gives his reason for writing his story of Jesus: “that you may come to believe [or may continue to believe] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, & that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). There is some ambiguity in the form of the verb “believe” that leaves unclear whether this Gospel was intended to attract those who did not yet believe in Jesus or to deepen the faith of those who already believed. In any case, the consequence of believing in Jesus as the Messiah & Son of God is the beginning of eternal life.

The basic theological message of Jn’s Gospel is simple & straightforward: Jesus the Son of God reveals the Father. The centre of this Gospel is the person & mission of Jesus. He is “the man from heaven” sent by his heavenly Father. His death is not a defeat; rather it is the “hour” of Jesus’ glory in which he begins his return to the Father. The Johannine Jesus invites his followers to share in his relationship with his Father – a relationship that is characterised by knowledge, love, unity & mission. In Jesus’ physical absence, the Spirit will animate & guide the community of Jesus’ followers until “the last day.”

Jn’s Gospel is provocative. Everything in this Gospel challenges the reader to come to a decision about Jesus. What do you think of him? Are you on his side or not? What are you going to do about it? Often by what it does not say, Jn’s Gospel raises other questions about important aspects of Christian life & theology. It says little or nothing about the meal at the Last Supper, so what was the attitude of the Johannine community to the Eucharist? What kinds of church structures & offices did it have? Since so much emphasis is placed on eternal life as having already begun in the decision for & about Jesus, what are we to expect on the last day?

The Johannine presentation of Jesus, especially as it is expressed in the Prologue (1:1-18), has provided terminology & ideas for the greatest Christian theologians throughout the centuries. The doctrinal influence of Jn’s Gospel is especially apparent during the period in which the early church councils made definitions about the person of Jesus largely on the basis of Jn’s Gospel. The declarations that Jesus is divine & thus on a level with the Father & the Holy Spirit were based on texts such as Jn 1:1 (“the Word was God”) & 20:28 (“my Lord & my God”). That Jesus had both a human & a divine nature was rooted in 1:14 (“the Word became flesh”). The pre-existence of Jesus is implied in 1:1-2 (“In the beginning was the Word”).
The language & ideas in Jn’s Gospel have been (& still are) understood by people of many different cultures & at many different times. There is much in this Gospel that would have appealed to various currents within ancient Judaism: wisdom, apocalyptic, sectarian movements etc. Both Jews & non-Jews influenced by Greek culture would also have found much to fascinate them. The first commentator on Jn’s Gospel was a Gnostic named Heracleon in the mid-2nd cent. Other Gnostics made use of Jn’s Gospel in their struggles with orthodox Christians. Christians in many lands today (e.g. India & China) find in Jn’s Gospel their entry point into the Scriptures.

However, Jn’s Gospel can be a dangerous text. Despite its beauty & nobility, it can be misused. Some groups have used its dualism as an excuse to separate themselves from others & to deny any validity to other religious approaches. Anti-Semites have exploited its negative comments about “the Jews” & applied them to the Jewish people in general & throughout history, including present times. Modern Gnostics (e.g. the “new age” movement) claim Jn for themselves when in fact the Johannine community opposed such thinking by insisting that Jesus the Word became a person in space & time (cf 1:14). & some theologians have used the Gospel’s high spirituality & abstract ideas without attending to it as a whole & reading it in its historical context.

We can avoid these dangers, or lessen them, by reading Jn’s Gospel as part of the church’s canon (authoritative collection) of Scripture. Jn is not the only Gospel & not the only approach to Jesus in the NT. It must be placed alongside the other Gospels & other books of the Bible. The present text as a whole is the authorised version of Jn’s Gospel. We cannot pick & choose among its sayings to bolster only peculiar positions in theology & practice.