

Series: Who Jesus is – According to the Writers of the Gospels

#4: Who Jesus Is, According to John

John 1:1-5, 10-14; 20:30-31

By Rev. John Gill

There is an old story about a man in a foreign country who wanted to learn to read and write. A visiting missionary offered to teach him, using the Bible as his textbook. The man learned rapidly, and soon had read much of the scriptures. The missionary had to continue on his journey, but some time later he returned to the community and looked up his former student. "How's the reading going," he asked, "are you still on the Gospel of John?" "Ah, no," was the reply. "I'm out of that long ago." Now I read the sports pages in the newspaper!"

Well, I hope you've taken the time to read all the way through John's Gospel this week because as you know, today the theme for our message is the Gospel of John. As you probably are aware, this is the final sermon in a series I am preaching on "Who Jesus is, according to" each of the writers of the four Gospels – Each gospel-writer answers that question a little differently, giving us four similar, yet distinctly different portraits of Christ.

If you have been following this series closely, you'll recall that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels – "synoptic," because they are similar to one another. Mark was the first to be written, and both Matthew and Luke used Mark as the template for their own telling of Jesus' life and ministry, adding to "Mark" stories and teachings of Jesus they were aware of. So basically, those first three gospels are quite similar.

But then there is John. John's way of telling the story of Jesus is (as Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz puts it) "a horse of a different color." It is about as different from the first three gospels as it could possibly be!

Even a casual reader of the New Testament will quickly notice how unique John's Gospel is. It is obvious that John didn't have Mark to go by (or he chose not to use it), nor does he seem to be dependent in any way on Matthew or Luke for his writing. In fact, a full 90% of the material in John is completely distinct from the Synoptics. 90%! How different is John? Just consider these facts:

In John, there is no genealogy of Jesus, no record of Jesus' birth or childhood, there is no temptation in the wilderness where Jesus was tempted by Satan, no transfiguration on the mountaintop, no great commission, and no ascension. Remarkably, John has no record of the institution of the Lord's Supper. And no Sermon on the Mount. John records no version of the Lord's Prayer that we repeat in worship every Sunday, but instead, Jesus offers long drawn-out prayers, entire chapters in length. What's more, John's Jesus tells NO parables, nor does he offer any of those short sayings – those catchy one-liners – that are so central to the Jesus of the first three Gospels.

And the chronology of Jesus' ministry is very different in John. What do I mean? Just two of examples will make the point: While in the first three Gospels, Jesus drives out the money-changers from the Temple at the close of his ministry, just days before his crucifixion – John sets this event at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. And the day the crucifixion took place is different in John: the synoptics say that he died on the day of Passover, while John insists it was the day before Passover.

But there is an even more significant difference between the gospels: Let me ask you this question: How long was Jesus' public ministry? Most people say, "Three years." Or was it one year?

If all we had to go by were the first three Gospels, we would say Jesus' ministry lasted only one year. Why? Because, in Mark's telling of the story, which is accepted to be accurate by Matthew and Luke, Jesus travels to Jerusalem only once to observe Passover, that fateful journey that led to the cross. What's more, according to the Synoptics, the bulk of Jesus' one year of ministry was in the region of Galilee in the north – only in the final weeks of his life was Jesus ministering in Judea as he traveled to Jerusalem.

But most of us believe Jesus' ministry lasted three years. The reason we think that is because of what we read in John. John clearly has Jesus make at least three visits to Jerusalem for the observance of Passover. Thus a three year ministry. What's more, according to John, the vast majority of Jesus' ministry took place in and around Jerusalem in Judea in the south, with only brief visits to Galilee. I told you John was a "horse of a different color!"

So John leaves out most of what the first three Gospels include. But on the flip side, he also provides us the only record of many other stories of Jesus that we have only in John's Gospel: Turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, six unique miracle stories found nowhere else, the visit by Nicodemus who is told by Jesus that he must be born again (the story, by the way, that includes the favorite verse of many people, John 3:16), the beloved "I am" sayings of Jesus," the conversation with the woman at the well where Jesus offers to give her living water, the claim of Jesus that he is the bread of life, the forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery, the image that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus washing the disciples' feet in the Upper Room, the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene where she mistakes him for the gardener, the story of doubting Thomas who needs to see and touch the resurrected Jesus in order to believe, the appearance of the resurrected Christ to the disciples who had gone back to their nets, and that beautiful scene where Christ asks Peter, "Do you love me" and instructs him to "Feed my Sheep."

Frankly, I'm glad John didn't follow the outline of Mark's Gospel, or the other two. Otherwise, just think how much poorer we would be – how much we would be missing in our conception of "who Jesus is!"

So, it's obvious that John is very different. But why? To understand that, we need to consider who wrote this gospel, when it was written, and to whom.

Like the other three Gospels, the name of the author is not specified in the text. The titles of the Gospels were assigned, based on traditional assumptions about who the author was. We have seen that Mark, a companion of Peter, probably actually did write Mark, and Luke, a companion of Paul, probably wrote Luke. If you were in worship three weeks ago, you might recall that the authorship of the Gospel we call Matthew is a little more in dispute – it likely was actually penned by a Jewish believer in Jesus in Antioch, who may not have been the disciple Matthew. That means that none of the writers of the first three Gospels were actually eye witnesses, much less participants, in the events they describe.

That's what makes John's Gospel so fascinating. While the text itself doesn't say that John wrote it, there is a very strong and convincing tradition that the author was indeed the disciple, John son of Zebedee, who was called by Jesus along with his brother James and his fishing partners, Peter and Andrew.

There are a number of things that point to the authenticity of this tradition: John never mentions himself by name in the text, but instead refers several times to “the Disciple whom Jesus loved” – and seems to claim that identify for himself. Another clue is that the writer appears to have a very detailed grasp of the geography of Judea and Galilee, as well as an intimate knowledge of the streets and political culture of the city of Jerusalem – especially notable, since Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans some 2 to 3 decades before this gospel was written. The author clearly had spent time in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus.

And the author throws in little details in his telling the stories that only an eyewitness would know. For example: all four tell of the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes. Only John mentions that they were barley loaves, and that they were provided by a little boy. John describes how the aroma of the perfume used by the woman who anointed Jesus filled the entire house at Bethany. And he knows the exact weight of the burial spices used to prepare Jesus’ body after he was taken down from the cross. And, in the story after the resurrection where the disciples go back to fishing and Christ appears, John tells us the exact count of the fish caught – 153, exactly!

If this is indeed the case, then John’s Gospel is the only first-hand account of the ministry, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus we have. People usually assume that since the first three gospels agree on the basic details of the story of Jesus’ life, that they are correct and that therefore John is mistaken, when in fact, it may be just the opposite!

Another thing that makes the authorship of John so intriguing is that this was the last of the four gospels to be written down, probably in Ephesus, dated sometime between 90 and 100 A.D. Tradition tells us that John was the only one of the 12 disciples to live into old age – all the rest died a martyr’s death. If John wrote the Gospel that bears his name, then he certainly did live to a ripe old age. He must have felt the need before he died to get down in writing the events and teachings of Jesus that he was aware of, material the other three gospels had failed to include. It was John’s final gift to the church.

Now, church tradition also says that this same John is the author of the Letters of John and the Book of Revelation, as well. While this is possible, most scholars today believe they were written by another “John” who was a leader in the early church, or by a disciple of John who used John’s name as a tribute to him. However, that is a whole different matter that we don’t have time to go into this morning. Whoever is the author of those other books that bear the name, “John,” I believe that the disciple John was indeed the author of this gospel.

So, to whom was John writing? Who was the intended audience?

By the time of the writing of this gospel, the make-up of the church had become dramatically different from what it was in its earlier years. In the first few decades, the followers of Jesus were primarily Jews who had come to accept that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. But gradually, more and more Gentiles began to respond to the preaching of Paul and the other Apostles, and there developed a conflict within the church about how these Gentile converts should be handled. Was this new Jesus Movement a sect within Judaism? Were the churches just “messianic synagogues,” or something new altogether?

In other words, there were many within the fledging faith who wanted to require Gentiles to first convert to Judaism (and adhere to all the Jewish laws) before they could become a Christ-follower. Others in the movement argued that, what Christ did on the cross freed us from the obligation to

slavishly keep all the regulations of the Jews – that Gentile converts to the new faith didn't have to be circumcised or observe Jewish law – they could come directly into the church through baptism.

Obviously, this view won out. This conflict was finally resolved by what has been called "The Jerusalem Council" that is described in the Book of Acts.

This led to an explosion of new Gentile believers all across the Mediterranean world – people who had come to faith in Jesus, but who had no knowledge of the Jewish religion and culture out of which Jesus came. The Synoptic Gospels were fine – so long as the reader understood Judaism. But if the reader was a Gentile from Antioch or Ephesus or Rome, much of what he would read in Matthew, Mark, or Luke would be a mystery and unintelligible. Therefore, John saw a need to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that the reader didn't have to have an understanding of Jewish history, culture, or prophecy, in order to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus. That means John was addressing his gospel to non-Jews, or new Gentile converts to the faith. And it explains why John is so different from the other Gospels.

So, who does John say that Jesus is?

If Mark's Jesus is the "Suffering Servant," and Matthew's Jesus is the "Messiah King," and Luke's Jesus is the "Son of Man," John's Jesus is the "Eternal Son of God." Or as one of my commentaries says it: The reason John wrote his gospel was "to prove conclusively that Jesus is the Son of God, and that all who believe in him will have eternal life."

John's Gospel is sometimes called a "spiritual Gospel," because its view of Jesus is highly elevated – what theologians call a "high Christology." That's why the traditional symbol in artwork for this gospel is an eagle, not only because eagles soar higher than all other birds, but because it was believed that only the eagle could look directly into the sun without flinching. William Barkley put it like this: John has "the most penetrating gaze of all the New Testament writers into the eternal mysteries, and the eternal truths, and the very mind of God."¹

John wants the reader to understand that, while Jesus was fully human who knew what it meant to live our life and die our death, Jesus was also fully divine. As you read through the Gospel of John, the divinity of Christ shines through. In seminary, one of our professors said that the Gospel of John is like a sheet of onionskin paper, with the word "Jesus" written on one side, and the word "God" written on the other. When you hold the paper up to the light, you see both at once. John is saying that, if you want to see what God is like, look at Jesus.

He does this by using two concepts that were well-known to his Gentile readers, as a way to convey who Jesus is. As I said, John was concerned to meet his readers where they were – so instead of using Jewish images and concepts to describe Jesus, he turns to Greek ways of thinking.

Rather than speaking of Jesus as the Suffering Servant foretold by Isaiah (as Mark does), or as the Jewish Messiah who was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (as Matthew does), or as the Son of Man, incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin (as Luke does), John says that Jesus is the "Logos" of God, God's creative force that brought all things into being.

"Logos" is a Greek word that is usually translated "Word," (with a capital "W"), because it is the very expression of God's will and intention. The word "Logos" can also mean "reason," and suggested to the

Greek mind the orderliness that lay behind the universe. John recognized that this Greek concept was also found in Jewish scripture. In the first Creation Story in Genesis, you'll recall, God spoke all things into being with his Word, and put them in order; "God said, let there be light, and (boom!) there was light." (You noticed that John actually begins his Gospel using very similar language – not by accident!)

Then throughout the history of God's people, prophet after prophet became the mouth-piece of God's "Word," calling people to return to the orderliness of God's will, and reminding them of God's intention for his Creation and for his people. Then, when the time was right, this "Word became flesh" in the person of Jesus, who is the Creating Force and the Force that brings order to all things.

Therefore, as the Logos, Jesus doesn't just speak for God, as the prophets had done; Jesus was the Word - the embodiment of God, himself. And since Jesus is the very "Logos" of God, we must acknowledge the truth of who Jesus is, if we are to experience the abundant and eternal life God desires for each of us. So John is saying that, as the Son of God, Jesus is God's Word and Reason, come in the flesh, that we might look on him and behold God's glory. So one Greek concept John uses to tell the story of Jesus is "Logos," the Word made flesh.

The other concept John borrowed from Greek-thought was Plato's idea of "truth," meaning that which is "real and genuine." You see, to the Greek way of thinking, there are two worlds, two dimensions, two realities, that exist side by side. One is the world in which we live, a wonderful world in its own way, but a world that is only a shadow of the other "real" world. What we perceive as the real world, is actually a flawed copy of this unseen ideal "real" world we aspire to. If John had been writing to a Jewish audience, he probably would have referred to this "reality" – this truth – as "the Kingdom of God."

As William Barclay says it, "The great reality, the supreme idea, the pattern of all patterns and the form of all forms was God. The great problem (to the Greek way of thinking) was how to get into this world of reality, how to get out of our shadows into the eternal truths. John declares that that is what Jesus enables us to do. He is reality come to earth."¹ Or, as Jesus himself expresses it in John's Gospel (8:32) "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth (this reality), and the truth will set you free." Jesus came to be the bridge by which we can cross-over, out of the shadow world in which we live, into the Reality of God's truth. And everything he does or says in this gospel is to that end.

Let me give you one example: Interestingly, John never refers to "miracles" that Jesus performed – they were always "signs." John's Jesus wasn't motivated to perform miracles out of compassion, so much as seeing them as an opportunity to point to this higher reality – the healing of a blind man is a "sign" that Jesus is the light of the world; feeding of the multitude is a "sign" that Jesus is the bread of life; the raising of Lazarus from the dead is a "sign" that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, and so forth. Again, Barclay: "To John, a miracle was never an isolated act; it was always a window into the reality of what Jesus always was, and always is, and always did, and always does."¹

So, in John, Jesus is the "real and true light," the "real and true bread," the "real and true vine." He is the "Way the Truth and the Life." Therefore, in John's gospel, everything Jesus did was not just a random act, but a window which allows us to see into this reality of God. He invites us to climb through that window, out of our shadow existence - into God's reality. To John, Jesus is the way you and I can become "real."

One of my favorite books is the classic children's story by Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit. Far from merely being a children's bedtime story, this little book contains some very profound theology. It's the story of toys in a child's nursery. The Velveteen Rabbit is a new Christmas present – the newcomer among a room full of playthings. The rabbit notices an old Skin Horse, tattered and shabby, yet regal, with a genuineness about him that the Rabbit was dawn to. The Velveteen Rabbit approaches the Horse, and asks him a very profound question – the same question the Gospel of John also asks:

“‘What is REAL?’ asked the Rabbit one day... ‘Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?’ ‘Real isn't how you are made,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real...’ ‘I suppose you are real?’” said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled. ‘The Boy's Uncle made me Real,’ he said. ‘That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.’”²

The Gospel of John is all about how we can become Real. And, how do we become real? God sent his Son into the world - to love us Real.

That's why Jesus came. And that is who Jesus is, according to John.

¹Much material is based on Barclay's commentary on John, Volume 1.

² <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/williams/rabbit/rabbit.html>