



What Is the Gospel of John?

MARIANNE MEYE THOMPSON

THE QUESTION THAT I POSE FOR THIS ESSAY IS FIRST A LITERARY AND HISTORICAL question: to what category of ancient literature does this gospel belong? Why is it so different from its canonical counterparts, Matthew, Mark, and Luke? What sources were available to the author of the gospel, how did he use them, and why did he use them as he did?

But to ask, “What is the Gospel of John?” is also to raise the issue of the *substance* of the gospel. In the earliest manuscripts, the gospels are given titles—“according to Matthew” and “according to Mark.” In other words, each is *the* gospel, according to a specific witness. But can we then hear the *one* gospel without muting the distinctive voice of *each* gospel? Can we hear the distinctive voice of John without letting it be drowned out by other prominent voices in the choir? Especially given western Christianity’s preferential option for the Pauline, can one truly hear the distinctive voice of John? Does the same voice always sing solo to the accompaniment of the others?

In the end, however, the question that I pose is also a theological question because it implicates God. Sooner or later, most really interesting questions do. The question, “What is the gospel?” is in the end a question about who God is because, if the gospel is indeed true, then it will be because God guarantees its truth and not because it possesses some independent and verifiable quality of “truth” apart from God. With these preliminaries in mind, we may turn first to some comments on the gospel as a written work and to some observations of its character.

“What is the Gospel of John?” is first a literary and historical question, but primarily a theological question. What is the Fourth Gospel about? What is it for? What does it do for us and to us?

I. LITERARY AND HISTORICAL OBSERVATIONS

1. *History and theology*

The differences between John and the other gospels were a matter of discussion already in the early church. One of the first attempts to explain the differences can be found in Clement of Alexandria's famous account of how the gospels came to be written. Clement states that Mark was written after Matthew and Luke and then adds this comment about John:

Last of all, aware that the bodily [or: physical] facts had been recorded in the gospels, encouraged by his pupils and irresistibly moved by the Spirit, John wrote a spiritual gospel. (Eusebius, *History*, 6:14)

Clement posits a distinction in kind between the gospels, the contrast between *somatikon* (bodily) and *pneumatikon* (spiritual). John is not the same sort of gospel, not the same sort of account, as the other three. In one form or another, Clement's characterization has had a long tenure in New Testament studies. It suggests that John was up to something fundamentally different than the authors of the other three gospels, or at least that the product that emerged is an essentially different sort of book. A typical description of their differences is that the Synoptics are history, John is theology. But for several reasons that distinction is not particularly helpful.

First, the recognition that all the gospels present theological accounts of the ministry and mission of Jesus makes impossible the easy distinction between the Synoptics and John in terms of an opposition of history and theology, nor would such a distinction have occurred to the author of this gospel.

Second, John presents his gospel as a first-order account of the life of Jesus. The Gospel of John is first of all a narrative of what happened when the Word of God was embodied in human form and "dwelt among us." What John presents is not some interpretation layered on top of history. Rather, John presents the historical significance of Jesus. For John, this account is in a genuine sense "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*"—as it really was.

Third, to speak of the gospel as theology vs. history is not particularly helpful, since there is no such thing as theology in the abstract. The description of John as theology generally implies that it is an interpreted account. But the really important question is *how* John's account interprets either the other gospels or the traditions that he received. It is not enough just to notice that he does so or to speak imprecisely of a blend of history and theology.

Yet, John's distinctive character has always demanded explanation and sometimes even defense of its place in the canon. To some extent the necessity for the apologetic has been created not just by John's differences but also because of the assumption that the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—provide the norm by which the character and function of a gospel is to be assessed. Perhaps, however, John should not be taken as an exception to the Synoptic norm, but as ultimately illuminating of what *a* gospel is and what *the* gospel is.

2. *What is a gospel?*

John provides the starkest instance of what a gospel is: a gospel is the narrative account of God's encounter with humankind through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The framing of that narrative is therefore inescapably a form of theological argument. In its exposition we attend to the deepest theological questions about the ways in which God is with us. We value and read all the gospels because they tell us how we are to understand and so also to respond to Jesus and because they invite response. No gospel makes this as explicit as does John. So, to paraphrase Mark, if you don't understand this gospel, how will you understand all the gospels?

3. *What is the gospel?*

John's Gospel shows us what *the gospel is* by showing us what *a gospel does*: it presents an interpreted account of God's encounter with humankind through Jesus and narrates how that embodied encounter engenders both belief and unbelief. John puts it this way: "The world was made through him, but the world did not know him....But to as many as received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:10-12). John's Gospel recounts a series of incidents showing how Jesus' work and word drew forth both unbelief and belief. It is that second set of responses that gets us close to what *the gospel is*. The gospel is the embodied presence of God in Jesus Christ that gives the power to become God's children, to respond to God and enter God's life-giving presence. But now we are into the theological aspect of the question, "What is the Gospel of John?"

II. THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the Pauline correspondence contains at least half a dozen different summaries of the gospel, John contains no such explicit summary, although 3:16 suggests itself: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." This well-known passage has often been understood in what we shall call a primarily individualistic and spiritualized way: In this view, God's work has to do primarily with the salvation of the individual, where salvation is understood as eternal life, a promise for the hereafter. God is not "here" with us, but "up there," and trying to get as many people as possible "up there" too. Jesus comes to tell us primarily how to get "up there." The individual is called to profess faith in Jesus, and the adequacy of such profession is measured either by the fervor or accuracy with which faith is held.

This reading of John yields an inadequate understanding of God's presence in and relationship to the world and hence an inadequate picture of the concrete shape of Christian life in this world. It is strange that the gospel of the incarnation has come to be read in such a disembodied way. Putting it another way, this interpretation fails to give an adequate account of what we are to believe, what we may

hope for, and how we are to live. Let me then propose some alternative ways of reading John by addressing those three issues.

1. *What are we to believe? What must we confess about our salvation?*

More than one passage in John emphasizes “believing in” Jesus. But given the monotheistic faith that John inherits, one cannot simply add Jesus to God and speak now of believing in God *and* in Jesus. Belief in Jesus must necessarily imply a relationship between God and Jesus. The task of christology is to spell out this relationship and to do so by beginning with theology or one’s understanding of God. This is, in fact, how John proceeds.

John’s fundamental assumption about God is that there is one God and that this God is “the one who is,” the living Father, the one who alone has “life in himself.” As the living God, God is also the source of all life, the creator of all that is. John is not interested in the unmoved mover, but the living life-giver. John captures this vision of the life-giving God in his most common description of God, namely, that God is Father. As Father, God is the source of life, the one who gives life to the Son. This is virtually a definition of what it means to call God “Father” in the Gospel of John: God is the one who gives life and, more particularly, the one who gives life to the Son. Father and Son imply the interdependent relationship and unity of God and Jesus.

This relationship and unity are expounded in an important juxtaposition of theological statements: “As the Father has life in himself, so he has given it to the Son to have life in himself” (5:26). On the one hand, the Father *has given* it to the Son to have life; the Son’s life is drawn from the Father. On the other hand, the life which the Son has is life *in himself*. In other words, the Son has life as God has it. The Father gives the Son “life in himself,” which is tantamount to saying that the Father grants divine function, prerogatives, and status to the Son. These two affirmations—that the Son has life in himself, and that the Son has that as a gift from the Father, show how John relates Son and Father.

While these statements affirm the unity and relationship of the Father and the Son, they also point to the way in which God gives life to this world and to human beings within it. First, these statements reinforce the earlier affirmation of the gospel, that all things were created through the Word. Second, through the Son, God becomes the Father of all those who are “born from above” or “born of God” and designated children of God. John distinguishes between Jesus as “Son” (*huios*) and believers as “children” (*tekna*) in order to make clear the distinction between Jesus’ relationship to God and that of believers. Yet the language of “Son” and “children” also shows the relationship between Jesus and believers; through the Son, the heir of the household of God, believers come to be children of God. Entering into the life-giving relationship of Father and Son constitutes the salvation of the children of God.

What we must confess, then, is that the very identity of God as the source and giver of life is known through and expressed in the relationship of Father and Son.

We must confess that God is a life-giving God, who is not willing that any should perish, and that in the last analysis death and darkness are the very realities that God works against. However we may wish to speak about God's sovereignty, we must take into account that God does not purpose death, but life, for the world. God creates; God sustains; God saves. Every dimension of life comes from and belongs to God, and this life is incarnated in the Son and manifested in the children of God. Because those who are God's children participate in the life of God, the shape of their life, community, and mission in the world will necessarily be framed in terms of embodying and witnessing to the creating, sustaining, and saving life of God.

The emphasis on the presence of eternal life in this world leads to the characterization of the gospel's eschatology as a "realized eschatology" in which the blessings of the future are realized and available in the present. This has led some interpreters of John to argue that the notes of future eschatology are alien to the gospel's fundamental vision of salvation. Given the gospel's emphasis on the presence of the life-giving God with the world, how does the gospel articulate what we may hope for?

2. What do we hope for?

What we hope for is life from God, with God, and in God. The ultimate eschatological hope in the Gospel of John is framed in terms of "seeing God," because the vision of God entails being in the presence of God, and sharing life with God for eternity. That life is not some "thing" we have apart from God, but is understood above all as participation in the life of God, abiding in God, being one with God.

The full vision of God awaits the future. According to the gospel, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (1:18). And again: "Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father" (6:46). Only the Son has ever had the direct and unmediated vision of God that is promised to believers, as a passage from 1 John makes explicit: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). "Seeing God" is the unique prerogative of the one who "is from God," a reference to the incarnate Word. Even Jesus' statement, "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father," does not change the situation entirely, for the disciple's vision of God is not the same as the Son's. As the Son, Jesus reveals the Father because the Son is the one who has and bestows life from God. In the Son, therefore, we see the Father. But the Son is not the Father.

Because in this world the Son makes the Father known, we truly "see" God, but only indirectly and in hidden ways. The hiddenness of the glory of the Father in the Son underlies every scene of the gospel. One cannot simply read the glory of God off the surface of Jesus' life or from his miracles, as though it comprised a halo around his words and deeds. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more veiled manifesta-

tion of glory than the cross, the ultimate manifestation and revelation of the glory, love, and life of the Father.

The signs of Jesus are also hidden manifestations of the glory of God in Jesus. After Jesus' first sign, the changing of the water to wine, the evangelist comments: "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (2:11). They saw and believed. But just as often in John, people see and do not believe. A number of people witnessed the raising of Lazarus from the dead and knew a miracle had been done. But whereas some believed in him, others plotted his death. Seeing the miracles of Jesus is no guarantee of understanding what they are all about. Not all seeing leads to faith. Signs lead to faith when grasped as indicators or pointers to a greater reality; and only when they are grasped as such do they fulfill their purpose.

But what do they point to? A common interpretation of the Johannine signs is that they point to something that is symbolized by them, but not actually embodied in them. The "real meaning" of the signs lies in their "spiritual" significance. So the feeding of the five thousand points primarily to the fact that God feeds people spiritually with the bread of life. This spiritualization of the miracles reads them in precisely the opposite way than that intended by John. John intends the miracles to signify the presence of God. But when they are read as pointing to realities which are not embodied in the signs, realities not here with us, they point not to the presence of God but rather to the absence of God.

For John the signs are the works of God and embody God's presence because God is the creator of all that is and, as the giver of all life, continues to sustain the world. Through Jesus' works, God grants life, and it is the character and work of God to give life, whether it be physical life or the life of eternity with God. Because Jesus confers life through his signs, Jesus' works are the works of God and one should "believe the works" (10:38; 14:11). Hence, it is not the power to work miracles but the power to give life that is at issue in discerning the work of God in the signs of Jesus. It is the embodiment of the life-giving power of God in Jesus that testifies to who he is in relationship to God and what he offers to human beings. God wills to give life to a world that simply does not know or seem to care about the one who made it. The ultimate expression of God's light and life-giving purposes is to be found in the incarnation of the Word of life in the world of darkness and death. Salvation is construed in terms of being in the light rather than in the darkness, of participating in the life of God, of having union and fellowship with God. God chooses to be made known, to be revealed, and salvation is therefore most graphically described as seeing God, of being in the presence of the one who is our life. This, then, is what we await and hope for.

But because the Word of God has become incarnate, we enter into God's life-giving presence through abiding in him; or, better, God's life-giving presence becomes instantiated in Jesus for us and our salvation. What we hope for is to enter into the fullness of that life of which we have the promise and guarantee in the in-

carnation. How does this vision of what we confess and what we wait for shape Christian life in the present?

3. *How are we to live?*

In recent decades, John's view of the Christian community in the world has been described negatively as "sectarian." Its sectarian character allegedly comes to expression in the description of it as "not of this world" and in narrowing Jesus' command to love one's enemies to the command to love one another. But such a characterization ignores Jesus' commission to his disciples: "As the Father sent me, so send I you" (20:21). Their mission is to bear witness to the truth of God's life and love, to embody that life and love not only in their community, but not least there. Jesus' words indicate that precisely because the mission with which the disciples are charged conforms to the mission of the incarnate Word, they will find themselves experiencing the same rejection that Jesus did, the same rejection that God does. Even as the glory of God was veiled in flesh and hidden in the cross, so too it is with the church.

It is easy, however, to misunderstand the way in which the incarnation is a model for the life and ministry of the Christian community. Whereas Jesus is characterized as the one who *is* from above, Christians are defined first of all as those who are "*born* from above" (3:3, 7), and the difference is crucial. As Miroslav Volf put it:

Christians do not come into their own social world from the outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the *insiders* who have diverted from their culture by being born again.¹

It is because they are diverted from their culture and given a new identity in God that Christians must embody in the world God's love and life, and that they must speak the truth of God into their culture. But it is also because they are "born of God" that they are enabled to do so.

Although the language ("born from above") has the potential to foster a false sense of superiority and unhealthy dualism, it also undermines any attempt to construe human identity and flourishing primarily in relationship to the things and values of this world. It challenges the church to examine its uneasy alliances with the norms of social, religious, and cultural institutions in order to discern which things are of God and further God's life-giving purposes and which do not. Finally, it challenges the highly individualized depictions of Christian faith, since all those who are "born of God" are sisters and brothers to each other and have accountability in and to this family.

¹Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994) 18-19.

For this life together and mission in the world, the children of God need great discernment. It is one thing to say we must speak and embody the truth; but it is quite another to know what the truth is and to be able to articulate it and live it out in appropriate ways. John itself is a witness to the way in which its author has contextualized the gospel in order to fulfill his purposes for those who read the gospel. And this leads, finally, to some comments on reading the gospel today.

III. READING JOHN TODAY

There is considerable ferment in the world of biblical studies about how one should read and study the Bible, with the so-called historical-critical method coming in for particular criticism. Whatever its flaws, the method has contributed much to understanding the Bible that I would not wish to give up. The method—or methods—have taught us to be able interpreters of Scripture through the disciplined exercise of exegetical, historical and literary skills. But these skills are not enough for the faithful interpreter of Scripture. The words of Jesus in Matthew come hauntingly to mind: “You tithe mint, and dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done without neglecting the others” (Matt 23:23).

What are “the weighty matters” that we should not neglect? First, we need to be clear that faithful interpretation of Scripture requires spiritual and moral maturity that enable the discernment necessary to hear the word of God in Scripture. We have tended to assume that good interpretation of the text leads to faithful living, but in earlier centuries it was assumed that faithful Christian living undergirds good interpretation. According to Athanasius:

For the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word.²

Alasdair MacIntyre put it this way, “What the reader...has to learn about him or herself is that it is only the self as transformed through and by the reading of the texts which will be capable of reading the texts aright.”³

Second, more important than the interpreter’s mastery of exegetical disciplines is the interpreter’s understanding of Scripture’s subject matter, and the capacity to think theologically as one carries out various exegetical tasks. We often lament today the biblical illiteracy in the churches; but its theological illiteracy is no less stunning. The lack of any sort of coherent understanding of what Scripture is all about and how the narrative of Scripture is our story contributes to the so often anemic, individualistic, and moralistic preaching that we hear today. Many people know some Bible stories; but mere knowledge of the Bible does not necessarily fa-

²St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s, 1953) 96.

³Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990) 82.

cilitate theologically sound interpretation of it. So how do we help to foster theologically interested readings of the Scriptures?

One way to do so is to make it clear that interpretation of the Scriptures is a theological act, entailing theological decisions and judgments. Theological interpretations do not arise automatically from historical and exegetical judgments, nor will theological questions be raised if we do not ask them. Although ignored or misunderstood today, older so-called pre-critical methods of reading and interpreting the Scriptures have some positive contributions to make because they contended that proper interpretation of the Bible arose from understanding Scripture's subject matter and coming to it with appropriate theological sensitivities. The so-called fourfold method of reading Scripture, for example, suggested that most passages of Scripture carried four levels of meaning: in addition to the literal or plain sense of the text, each text also had an allegorical, anagogical, and tropological sense; or, a sense that dealt respectively with faith, hope, and love. That is to say, each text addressed the following questions: What must the church confess that God has done for the world and its salvation? What do we hope for? How are we to live? These questions provide prejudices for reading the Bible that are fruitful for its interpretation. When some of the excesses of the method are chastened by the close attention to the text that more recent literary and historical methods champion, it serves Scripture and its readers well. Indeed, the current essay followed the outlines of this method.

One of the strengths of such interpretation is that it conceives of Scripture as a substantive unity that hangs together because of the narrative that binds it together. In fact these questions look to the past, the present, and the future, and arise from and depend on the fact that there is a coherent narrative that underlies Scripture and to which it bears witness. In forcing attention to past, present, and future, these questions prevent the quick and sloppy move from the literal to moralistic levels that characterizes so much of what passes for application of the text. These questions assume that Scripture tells us what God has done, but that a recitation of history would not be the same as an account of the gospel. Scripture tells us that what God has done is good news *for us*. In other words, Scripture is not just about what God has done, but how God's actions are gospel for us. Thus, Scripture shows us what we must confess. Scripture also tells us what we await and hope for, what we trust God to do. Thus Scripture has an inevitable eschatological focus. And because Scripture gives an account of what God has done for us, and what we await, it tells us how we are to live in the present.

What, then, has God done for us according to John? What is the Gospel of John? In the incarnation, God has taken on human form and entered into the world of death and darkness, taken on an embodied presence that reveals to us that God's ultimate purposes for the world are life-giving, and that God persistently and faithfully works to that end. Salvation is construed primarily as knowing God, as participation in God's life, and as having fellowship with God through the one in

whom God's presence becomes embodied among us. The Gospel of John does not suggest that in Jesus God began to be present with the world but rather that we have the fullest manifestation of God's presence in the person of Jesus. For, through the Word of God, God has always spoken life, grace, and truth into and to the world. This is now most fully embodied in Jesus. It is further embodied in the life of God's people in the world. All this is good news for us because that life is not available somewhere up there or out there, but present among us, embodied among us, living in and through us. ⊕

MARIANNE MEYE THOMPSON is professor of New Testament interpretation at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. She is the author of the forthcoming The God of the Gospel of John (Eerdmans, 2001).