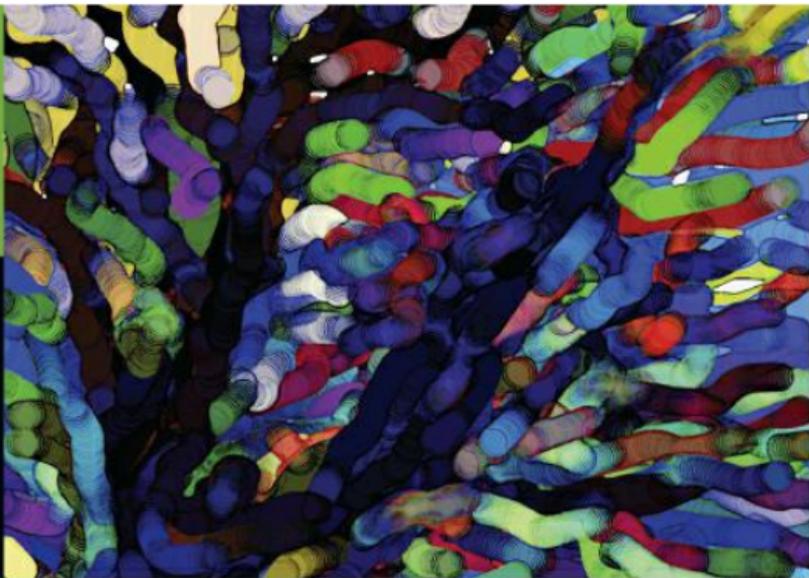


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BRUCE MILNE

The Message of **John**

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of John

Here is your King!

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General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

Author's preface

Anyone attempting an exposition of John's gospel, however modest, faces a daunting challenge. Apart from the formidable demands of the text itself, the voluminous secondary literature poses a prodigious obstacle. The pages which follow make no claim to establish new critical landmarks; the New Testament specialist, should he or she chance to open these pages, will not discover any blazing new insights on the celebrated textual and theological problems which surround this gospel. As far as the latter are concerned I have been content to stand on the shoulders of others (though hopefully without surrendering an independent judgment). My particular debts in that regard will be evident from the footnotes.

In keeping with the goals of *The Bible Speaks Today* series, this volume is written for the thoughtful lay person (rather than the specialist) who seeks a deeper appreciation of the text of the gospel, and wishes for help in relating its message to the world of today. In particular I have tried to heed the plea of the General Editor, John Stott, that I have in special view 'the hard-pressed preacher', whether lay or clerical. Belonging to that company of preachers on a daily basis made my pursuit of that goal a little easier!

The gospel of John, as my former teacher George Beasley-Murray points out, is 'the preacher's gospel *par excellence*' (*John*, p. x). More than thirty years ago, I stood for the very first time in a Christian pulpit of a tiny windswept church in the remoter reaches of the Shetland Islands before a handful of long-suffering fisherfolk. Then I chose my text from John 6:35, 'I am the bread of life', neither the first nor last preacher to begin a pulpit career from this great gospel.

The fascination of John continues undiminished, its challenge unending. If these pages make even the slightest contribution to that renewal of expository preaching which, in this writer's judgment, remains the single most urgent need of the modern church, the author will be more than compensated for any effort expended in their production.

My most sincere thanks are due to the Council and members of the very special church I am privileged to serve, First Baptist, Vancouver, for three months' leave during the summer of 1991 to tackle this project. In particular I am indebted to Edith Paul, widow of one of my distinguished predecessors at First Baptist, for a peaceful hideaway in her home to install my computer, as well as the inspiration of her exquisite garden, and to Stephen Morton, another 'gift' from the congregation, whose contribution to the technical production of the manuscript is impossible to quantify. My thanks are also due to Herb Adams, who took time off from writing mathematics textbooks to correct the proofs.

My dear wife Valerie, as well as offering many editorial suggestions for improving the text, was an inspiration throughout.

The impact on the history of the world of John's twenty-one brief chapters is in the end incalculable. For all the controversy which continues to surround them they comprise a moral and spiritual potency which over the centuries has transformed communities, toppled kingdoms, liberated multitudes, and remade human character on a scale without parallel in the accumulated literature of the ages. That power remains present in this gospel, and the reader, whether Christian or non-Christian, can discover it today. Simply put, in the paragraphs of John's gospel the living Lord Jesus Christ is met in his glory and grace, his majesty and tenderness, and his presence can be experienced as a perceptible reality in your life. 'These are written ... that by believing you may have life in his name' (20:31). May I challenge you to test that claim—and make the incomparable discovery that it happens to be true!

Vancouver
Bruce Milne
September 1992

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Abbreviations

- AV The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible (1611).
- Gk. Greek
- JBP *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).
- LXX The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, 3rd century BC.
- NASB The New American Standard Bible, 1963.
- NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).
- RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946, 2nd edition 1971; OT 1952).
- TDNT* *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, translated into English by G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Eerdmans, 1964–1976).

Introduction

1. Authorship

Most books published today begin with a title page identifying the author. When 'John's gospel' was first published, however, that initial authorial identification was omitted, and readers have to wait until near the end of the book before finding out who the writer is. Even then we are not entirely out of the dark, for he is identified simply as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (21:20) who 'is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down'. ^[1]

From one point of view the relative anonymity of the human author is not of ultimate importance since the true author is the divine Holy Spirit, whose superintendency of the human witness is attested at several points in the gospel. ^[2] Elsewhere, the book of Hebrews, for example, contains a writing which is anonymous and yet whose inspiration and canonicity are hardly in question. While that point is conceded, however, it is not unimportant for purposes of interpretation to try to clarify the human process by which a book came to be written. Furthermore, in the case of a gospel which is a record of events, the historical reliability and eyewitness credentials of the author are necessarily important considerations.

Traditionally the fourth gospel has been attributed to John, son of Zebedee, one of the 'inner circle' of Jesus' twelve disciples, and subsequently a leading apostle in the emergent church. ^[3] The grounds for this attribution are strong ones. We can distinguish between *internal grounds* (evidence within the gospel itself), and *external grounds* (evidence from other early writers).

The *internal* evidence for Johannine authorship was classically assembled by Westcott, ^[4] who argued that there were indications within the gospel that the author was (a) a Jew, (b) a Jew of Palestine, (c) an eyewitness of what he describes, (d) an apostle and (e) the apostle John. While each of these points has been questioned at one time or another, Westcott's case has never been completely demolished.

The author's Jewishness appears beyond serious question from the multiple allusions to Jewish customs, topography and history scattered throughout the gospel. It is also reflected in the style of Jesus' teaching. This last point, touching the literary provenance of the gospel, is a fruit of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1947, which uncovered a parallel, first-century, Palestinian thought-world. ^[5] The authentic Jewish orientation of the gospel is also indicated by the absence of echoes of the controversies which were current in the non-Jewish churches around the time the gospel was written.

The eyewitness aspect is explicitly claimed at several points in the text. ^[6] It appears reflected in the many vivid touches throughout the gospel; ^[7] the realistic character portrayals of people like the woman of Samaria in chapter 4, or the man born blind in chapter 9; the writer's intimate knowledge of the reactions of the disciples ^[8] and of Jesus himself; ^[9] and the details such as a knowledge of the names of characters who are anonymous in the parallel accounts in the synoptic gospels. ^[10]

That the author is one of the twelve is indicated by his having been present in a place of some significance at the last supper (13:1ff., 23). Mark 14:17 indicates that only the twelve participated at that event.

The greatest controversy has gathered around the claim that 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', the author according to 21:24, is in fact John, son of Zebedee. The title appears only towards the end of the gospel. ^[11] Some have even questioned whether this 'disciple' is a real person at all since, it is argued, no-one would claim such a title for themselves, nor would anyone readily call someone else by it. This last allegation appears somewhat gratuitous. We cannot at this remove from the events dogmatize about how people are perceived by others. While the title is certainly unusual it appears congruent with a fairly obvious desire for anonymity on the author's part. It may simply reflect his sense of wonder at the electing grace of God in his experience, or perhaps more plausibly be a nickname which arose from the individual's repeated reference to the amazing way Christ had loved him. An explicit equation of this disciple with John is not made within the gospel (though it is amply confirmed by external sources, as we will shortly observe). It is supported, however, by the otherwise astonishing omission of John, the son of Zebedee, from the gospel at any other point (except 21:2) when other 'lesser' disciple figures are quite regularly recognized. ^[12] There is also the notably close association in this gospel of the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' with Peter, ^[13] echoing the close association of John and Peter in Acts. ^[14] We note too the maturity of reflection expressed in this gospel, along with the evidence of John having lived to a considerable age, and also the many parallels in thought and expression with the three letters of John in the New Testament, letters written by one who had 'seen with our eyes,... looked at and our hands have touched ... concerning the Word of life' (1 Jn. 1:1). If the writer is not John the son of Zebedee, we are left asking who this disciple could have been who was clearly most closely associated with Jesus, attained such an intimate understanding of his heart and mind, composed this remarkable gospel, and yet disappeared from the scene without any trace beyond his enigmatic title, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.'

The *external* evidence for the authorship of John is extensive. As with the other New Testament books, there is a body of literary traditions dating from the early centuries which comments on the authorship. While they cannot be followed slavishly, their witness certainly needs to be weighed, since these witnesses are patently much closer to the original

composition of the documents than any scholar can be today.

The first major witness is Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the latter part of the second century, who reports that John, the Lord's disciple, wrote the gospel and published it at Ephesus, and that he lived on until the time of the Emperor Trajan (AD 98). Eusebius reports that Irenaeus' authority for this information was the aged presbyter Polycarp, who had been a confidant of the apostles themselves, and had conversed with John in person. Irenaeus' testimony is the more impressive when we recall that he was in close contact with the major church in Rome during his ministry in Lyons, and hence that it is highly likely from the breadth of his contacts that Polycarp was not the only source of his conviction about the authorship of the gospel.

This view of the authorship of John was accepted without question by other major second-century figures like Tertullian, Clement and Origen, who was himself the author of a major early commentary on this gospel. *The Muratorian Canon*, published in Irenaeus' time, also attributes the gospel to John, adding that he wrote it following a vision given to Andrew.

The fact that the gospel attained fullest acceptance in the churches from the second century onwards is the more striking when one weighs the fact that it had two major problems associated with it. One was that the gospel was quoted and used polemically by the heretical Gnostic teachers during the first half of the second century. Claiming to impart a secret knowledge of God (GK. *gnōsis*, knowledge) they used its high Christological statements to support their denials of the true humanity of Jesus. (What they failed to see, and what orthodox apologists were to point out to them, was that this very gospel is also a clear witness to Jesus' true humanity).¹⁵ The other difficulty with this gospel was its apparent distinctiveness of style and content when compared with the other three gospels. We will address that issue below, but it should not be imagined that this is a modern problem. The fact that despite these handicaps this gospel was afforded universal acceptance is simply inexplicable unless the original author was a distinguished figure of known apostolic credentials. Further, it is surely unthinkable that these early Christian leaders, many of them people of considerable culture and intelligence, could have embraced the Christian faith and faced the prospect of persecution, and even horrible martyrdom, without having enquired into the origins and authenticity of the documents upon which their faith rested.

In other words, it is difficult to believe that Luke was alone in his desire to have 'carefully investigated everything from the beginning... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught' (Lk. 1:3-4). It is the more impressive accordingly that in such a context John's authorship of the fourth gospel appears to have been universally affirmed.

In the light of these facts it might be thought that to question John's authorship is 'a rather desperate expedient that stands against the force of the cumulative internal evidence and the substantial external evidence'.¹⁶ Scholarly opinion, however, is far from united on this issue. On internal grounds 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' continues to trouble interpreters, and externally much has been made of a citation by Eusebius, quoting Papias, another early sub-apostolic figure, which appears to distinguish between John the apostle and 'John the Elder'. This latter John, it is argued, was a disciple of John the apostle, and was the author of the gospel, but became confused with John the apostle to whom the gospel was mistakenly attributed. The Eusebius passage, however, is somewhat ambiguous as far as the alleged distinction between the two Johns is concerned, and there is no hint there of John the Elder, even if he existed, being the writer of the gospel.

Those wishing to pursue this issue should consult the major commentaries or introductions to the New Testament. Sufficient to say, the traditional view, that John the son of Zebedee was the author, certainly continues to be defensible. While no limits should be set to the activity of the sovereign Spirit of God, he commonly works through appropriate human vehicles, and it is reassuring to be able to affirm that in the composition of this great gospel he used one who stood in the closest historical relationship to the events described.

2. John and the synoptics

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament gospels indicates a difference in style and content between John's and the other three. These differences raise serious questions: are the gospels reliable accounts of what happened in the time of Jesus? More specifically, since on most points it is John who appears out of step with the others, is *his* gospel reliable?

Before identifying and commenting on the differences, it is helpful to first stake out the area of common ground between all four gospels. All four feature the witness of John the Baptist as the historical prelude to Jesus' ministry, the call and instruction of the disciples, the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus' voyage with his disciples on the sea of Galilee, Peter's confession of faith, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus' remarkable claims and his acts of power, the developing opposition and hostility of the Jewish religious leaders, the cleansing of the temple, Jesus' final meal with his disciples, his arrest in Gethsemane, his trial, condemnation and crucifixion, his resurrection from the dead on the third day, his resurrection appearances and his commissioning of his disciples. In addition there are numerous specific sayings which are common or appear in parallel form in all four gospels. This is a not inconsiderable list.

The differences may be summarized under five headings:

a. Material which appears only in the other three gospels

Some of this covers incidents or teaching which occur in only one, or at most two, of the other gospels (e.g. the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son which are in Luke only; the raising of Jairus' daughter which is in Matthew and Mark only). So, despite their apparent appeal, John's omitting them is of no greater significance than their omission by one or more of the other evangelists.

More difficult to account for is John's omission of the transfiguration, the parables in their synoptic form, healings of

demoniacs, the Lord's Supper, and the agony in Gethsemane, all of which appear in the three other gospels. The difficulty, however, is greatly reduced if John sees his task as complementing the other writers rather than as replacing them, or writing a full, comprehensive account of Jesus' ministry.

That John knew of the other gospels before writing his own is at least arguable. Scholars have claimed to find evidence in John's text of knowledge of Mark, and possibly Luke. If Luke was aware of 'many' other accounts when he came to write (Lk. 1:1), it is difficult to believe that John, writing as is generally believed some years after the others, could have been in total ignorance of the efforts of his fellow evangelists. The truth is that *each* evangelist is selective; John himself tells us that the available traditions about Jesus would exhaust any known library (20:30; 21:25). That 'Jesus did many other miraculous signs ... which are not recorded in this book' could be uttered as truly by Matthew, Mark and Luke as by John. Each evangelist chose from within the mass of available material those elements which would serve his own particular purpose in writing. John has already given ample stress to the revealing of Jesus' glory so that the transfiguration is not essential to his account, particularly as his presentation identifies the cross as the supreme moment of the glorification of the Son. John has his own selection of Jesus' parables and vivid figures of speech, though they are cast in a different style. His account of Jesus' healing ministry is *very* selective and happens not to include the curing of a demoniac (nor other categories of needy folk, such as deaf mutes or 'lepers'). His cataloguing of the work of the devil, however, is clear enough. The agony in Gethsemane is foreshadowed in 12:27–28; and the last supper is given rich and compatible context by the footwashing. Furthermore, if John was able to assume that at least one or two of the other gospels were already in circulation, his omissions are the more comprehensible.

b. Material which appears only in John

This encompasses large sections of John's earlier chapters, e.g. the wedding at Cana, and the conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. It also includes the raising of Lazarus, the discussions with the Jews, and the farewell discourses and foot-washing. A significant reason for the differences, however, arises from the fact that John concentrates almost entirely on the ministry of Jesus in and around Jerusalem during the temple feasts. The synoptic writers by contrast concentrate to a great extent on ministry in the north, around Galilee. We should bear in mind again the necessary selectivity of all four evangelists. If a 'gospel' is by definition an attempt to compile a biography, in our modern sense, of the entire life and teaching of Jesus, then not John alone, but all the evangelists fall short of the requirement. To assume this as the evangelists' aim is, however, at clear variance with their stated intentions. ¹⁷ A 'gospel' is rather the telling of the story of Jesus in such a way that the unique significance of his person and work impacts the reader, enabling him or her to meet Jesus for themselves and be guided in following him. Patently we are not dealing here with the usual genre of literary biography.

At this point it is worth stressing the many points at which John complements the synoptic account by answering questions which the synoptics leave unanswered. To cite just two examples, why did the first disciples suddenly leave everything to follow Jesus? Perhaps it was the sheer impact of his person, but John gives us a clearer answer. They had already met Jesus (1:35–50), and so the decision to follow him was the culmination of a growing acquaintance. Or again, the citation from Jesus' teaching made by the witnesses at his trial before the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:58), otherwise obscure in the synoptics, is recorded in John 2:19.

c. Difference in presentation

There are more extended discourses in John, and less straightforward narrative, than in the other gospels. More specifically, the Jesus we meet in the fourth gospel employs rabbinical methods of argument and regularly utters unvarnished theological principles. The synoptic Jesus is more anecdotal, and commonly employs a popular style in his preaching, using stories (parables) to make his theological points.

The difference, however, upon examination, is less significant than appears on the surface. The key is the difference of audience. As with all good teachers (and Jesus was arguably the greatest of teachers) the form was dictated by the hearers. The synoptic writers in their record of Jesus' teaching concentrate on his ministry in the north, in the Galilean region of his upbringing. John's primary focus, as we have already noted, was the more sophisticated, theologically aware milieu of Jerusalem. In addition, the methods and forms of the Johannine discourses have been shown to be congruent with those of synagogue teaching, which could involve dialogue with the audience, and the Scrolls at Qumran have uncovered a first-century thought-world in the southern Palestinian region which is wholly compatible. ¹⁸ In our examination of these discourses we shall see again and again how perfectly they 'fit' with their claimed setting and with the attitudes and beliefs of the hearers. Besides which, Matthew includes a passage which would be entirely at home in the middle of any of Jesus' discourses in John (Matthew 11:25–30). John *does* have his equivalent to the parables, though the form is less of a story. Who would dare assert, however, that the same creative mind was not capable of both forms? If a C. S. Lewis was capable of producing sophisticated literary criticism, celebrated children's fiction, poetry, Christian apologetics, science fiction and autobiography, then we need to take the greatest care before dogmatizing about what the only one sinless and divine teacher in history is or is not capable of producing.

d. Differences in historical detail and chronology

There are four particular problems: the cleansing of the temple (John sets it at the beginning of the ministry, the synoptics set it at the end), the duration of the ministry, the date of the last supper and the disciples' understanding of Jesus.

On the first of these there is no inherent impossibility about there having been two such incidents during Jesus' ministry. As we shall note in the exposition, there are good psychological reasons for this action as the ministry was launched and also as it drew to its conclusion.

The issue of duration is not an acute one once it is recognized that the synoptic writers often leave chronology and duration fairly vague. John sets Jesus in relation to three Passovers and so requires a duration of two to three years. Nothing in the synoptics makes that impossible.

The question of different chronologies for the last supper arises because John in a number of texts appears to set the supper meal before the Passover began (*i.e.* on the Wednesday evening of Holy Week) with the crucifixion taking place the following day, the Thursday, coinciding with the slaughter of the Passover lambs in the temple. This is seen as a Johannine historical inaccuracy in order to make a valid theological point, *viz.* Jesus is the true Passover Lamb (just as he is the true Temple, the true Vine, *etc.*). That John sees Jesus as the fulfilment of the Passover sacrifices appears correct (*cf.* 19:36), but whether he alters the date of the crucifixion to make the point more forcibly is certainly not proved. The texts which are alleged to support a revision of date will be commented on below ^[19] but in no case appear to 'prove' a contradiction. Another approach suggests that John and the synoptic writers may have been operating with different calendars. ^[20] Whatever the solution there do not appear conclusive grounds to set the evangelists in opposition.

e. The appreciation of the person of Jesus

This provides a final point of apparent contrast. In the synoptics the disciples' understanding grows slowly and comes to mature expression only after the resurrection, although there are important points of realization along the way, notably at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:16). In John the higher categories appear present much earlier (*cf.* 1:41, 49).

Again the distinctions are more apparent than real. It is to be doubted that the disciples in John's gospel have any genuine appreciation of who Jesus is in the early period of their association with him. Their limited understanding is evident at numerous points; and indeed as late as the last supper they are apparently still confused about Jesus' relationship to the Father (*cf.* 14:9f.), the very heart of his teaching as John records it. Then, no less than today, the real test of understanding is not an ability to use theological ideas and titles but action based upon the truths professed. By that standard all four gospels speak with the same voice. In John, as clearly as in the synoptics, when the disciples' faith is put to the test in the Garden of Gethsemane they forsake Jesus and flee.

Thus the distinctions, even where real, need not diminish our appreciation of the historical trustworthiness of John's account. In the presence of the Word made flesh no single approach can ever be sufficient, nor any four for that matter. But God has purposed in his gracious providence the existence of the four gospels, each special and each important. Each is a witness to Jesus in a way which truly enables us to meet with Christ and set our lives under his leadership. Within that chosen team of witnesses John and his 'spiritual gospel' take an honoured place. ^[21]

3. Purpose and date

A wide variety of purposes have been alleged for the gospel. These include the supplementing of the synoptic gospels, the correcting of the synoptic gospels, the combating of gnosticism, the combating of docetism (the early heretical view which denied the true humanity of Christ), the arraignment of unbelieving Jews, the opposing of the continuing followers of John the Baptist and the opposing of sacramentalism in the early church. In fact John tells us himself why he wrote: '... these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (20:31). There appears no reason to disallow this statement. John writes to bring his readers to faith in Jesus Christ.

It needs to be added, however, that there is a possible alternative reading in the Greek for 'believe' in this verse. The reading followed in the NIV reflects an aorist tense expressing a decisive act of believing: 'that you may (come to) believe (GK. *pisteusēte*)'. By this reading John's purpose is evangelistic; he writes to produce decisive commitment to Christ. The alternative reading is a present tense (GK. *pisteuēte*), and would give a meaning like 'these are written so that those who believe may go on believing', *i.e.* may hold on to their faith and grow in it, a discipling purpose. On balance the textual support for the former appears stronger. Certainly there can be no doubt as to John's intention to confront his readers with the claims of Christ and to challenge them to respond. The proven evangelistic power of this gospel needs no documentation. While acknowledging this to be the *primary* purpose, however, it is not impossible to affirm a number of secondary aims as well. There can be little doubt that John is conscious of addressing Christians as well as non-Christians through his gospel, and hence of encouraging Christians to continue and grow in their faith. The 'upper room' discourses in particular are replete with teaching for the disciple of Christ. It is also likely that John is not unaware of the docetic tendencies in the Graeco-Roman culture within which he wrote, so the clear stress which John places on the true humanity of Jesus may well have had that heretical tendency in view. Above all, however, John is an evangelist in the classical sense; he writes to win lost people for Christ. At a time when world evangelization is again on the church's agenda John's presentation of his Master is truly a 'tract for the times'.

The precise dating of John is not easy to determine. Once it is seen to contain its own relatively independent witness to Jesus, the gospel could conceivably have been written at any point in John's maturer years. One striking event which must be weighed in dating all of the New Testament writings is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. This massive upheaval of Jewish life and thought is not reflected in any way in the gospel. This would probably imply a date either some years after, by which time the dust would have had time to settle from the calamity, or the period before. In 5:2 John refers to the Pool of Bethesda by 'there is', not 'there was'. While too much ought not to be placed on this, it equally should not be dismissed. If the Pool was still identifiable when John wrote we are looking at a date in the late 60s, certainly prior to AD 70. A date around this time might also explain John's relative lack of contact with the other gospels. The traditions which surround the composition of the gospel in the early church would appear to support a somewhat later dating, perhaps sometime in the early 80s, though of course within John's lifetime. Final certainty is not possible, but we have clearly travelled a long way from the days when John's gospel was cavalierly discounted as an authentic first-

century witness to Jesus Christ and dated well into the second century.

4. John and Jesus

John is the most explicitly theological of the four gospels and contributes important insights on all the primary loci of Christian doctrine. The nature and attributes of God; ^[22] humanity, fallen and redeemed; ^[23] the person of Christ (see below); the work of Christ; ^[24] the person and work of the Holy Spirit; ^[25] the church and its mission; ^[26] and the life of the new world. ^[27] The reader is referred to the relevant sections of this book and to the major commentaries for detailed theological exposition.

The supreme doctrinal focus of this gospel is, however, the person of Christ (although never in separation from his work). As far as the deity of Christ is concerned, John affords possibly the clearest witness in the New Testament. ^[28] The deity, however, is never separable from the true humanity of Christ. ^[29] He is simultaneously divine and human; not one at one point and the other at another point, but both together at every point.

When the church attempted to clarify its understanding of the person of Jesus Christ at Nicea in 325, and again at Chalcedon in 451, this gospel was of particular help in undergirding the confession of One who is both true God and true man. John makes no attempt to dilute the full reality of both the deity *and* humanity of Christ and so helped the church to confess Jesus Christ as one person in two natures. It is important to recognize that the framers of the early Creeds never imagined that they were providing an exhaustive explanation of who Christ was; that is a mystery forever beyond our grasp. What they saw themselves doing was simply (!) erecting, in the light of the witness of Scripture, certain boundary walls within which the person of the God-man was to be authentically encountered. Outside these limits lay heresy; within these limits lay truth.

Similarly, today, we are invited to approach reverently within the walls of the Word of God, to gaze wonderingly and adoringly upon the glory of the everlasting Son made flesh, and then go forth to live for him amid the realities of our everyday world. John's gospel helps us to do that. But who the Son is in himself remains a mystery beyond our comprehension.

It is this mystery which lies behind the revelation in this gospel, as in all the gospels. It is also the explanation of the effect of a study of John's gospel, for while by the end of it we sense we know Christ better, at the same moment we find ourselves having to acknowledge that he is even further beyond our grasp. This should not surprise us. If the ancient theological maxim is valid, *Deus comprehensus non est Deus* (a God who is comprehended fully is not God), then it is equally true to assert, *Christus comprehensus non est Deus* (a Christ who is comprehended fully is not divine).

The mystery of Jesus Christ is the theme of this gospel; always beyond us, yet always summoning us to explore it more fully. The exploration and service of the Godhead will be our endless, though blissful, task in the world to come; but we can begin it now, and there can be no better place to launch out into the depths of it than to study, and expound, this great gospel by John.

The Gospel of John

John's concern is to tell us about Jesus Christ; his book is a 'gospel', a proclamation of the good news (20:31). Arguably, he knows about several of the other gospels—he may well have studied Mark and has some acquaintance with Luke. John is probably aware therefore that the others have prefaced their accounts of Jesus' ministry by referring to his promised forerunner, John the Baptist.¹ Matthew and Luke go still further back to the birth of Jesus,² and also provide genealogical tables linking Jesus to Abraham³ and Adam.⁴

John is especially conscious of the 'big picture'; Jesus' life and mission represent the critical central moment of all existence and all history, so he begins his account by setting Jesus against the widest possible horizon; he relates him to God and his eternal purposes, and to the entire life of the universe. 'The other gospels begin with Bethlehem; John begins with the bosom of the Father. Luke dates his narrative by Roman emperors and Jewish High Priests; John dates his "In the beginning"'. Matthew and Luke take us to the cradle and the manger, Mark to the prophecies of old, but John takes us back into the mists of eternity.'⁵

John attempts this specifically in his 'prologue' consisting of the first 18 verses. This opening paragraph achieves several things. It sets the scene for the events to be described later, introduces John the forerunner, and affords a 'prevision' of the gospel as a whole. Numerous commentators see it functioning rather as an overture to an opera. It tells of the deeds and significance of Jesus Christ up to the point of his entry upon the human story as a participant. In support of this way of understanding the prologue we can note that 1:1–18 is full of verbs rather than nouns and adjectives (there are no fewer than 44 verbs in the 18 verses); *i.e.* it is primarily about the *deeds* of Jesus rather than his nature or being. The prologue recounts the first part of his 'ministry'. This may seem too prosaic a view of a passage which has at times been interpreted as 'poetic', but it does not restrict the soaring heights of truth in these verses. It does help ensure, however, that we are captivated by the person and activity of Christ himself rather than by any alleged artistry on the part of the evangelist.

Chapters 20 and 21 similarly give an account of the deeds and significance of Jesus Christ after the conclusion of his earthly ministry. This allows us to attempt a division of the gospel. In dividing the gospel for purposes of exposition a commitment to a particular perspective is necessary. Recognizing that no single category can even begin to encompass the breadth and richness of John's portrait of Jesus, we take our cue from the dominance of the passion story in the gospel. In his presentation of the passion, John's preferred category, as we shall see when examining the text, is that of kingship. Jesus is the 'crucified king'—'Here is your King!' (19:14). One way of dividing the gospel is therefore as follows:

- A. The ministry of the pre-incarnate king (1:1–18)
- B. The ministry of the incarnate king (1:19–19:42)
- C. The ministry of the risen king (20:1–21:25)

A. The ministry of the pre-incarnate king (John 1:1–18)

1. Jesus Christ and the eternal God (1:1–2)

John uses a special category: Jesus Christ is the Word of God. The Greek term is *logos*.¹ This word had a wide usage in the first-century world, touching a range of cultural and philosophical contexts. In using it John would have made chords resonate in the minds of a wide variety of his readers. Scholars have found it a particularly fruitful theme for investigation to establish possible sources for the *logos* concept, and to decide which one was especially determinative for this gospel.

The primary point of reference is almost certainly the Old Testament and Jewish religion. As we shall recognize again and again, John assumes a working knowledge of the Old Testament on the part of his readers. The opening phrase *In the beginning* ... links directly to Genesis 1:1: 'In the beginning God created ...'. This allusion is the more likely bearing in mind that Jewish readers referred to the Bible books by their opening words. Thus *In the beginning* is shorthand for Genesis. 'The Word of God' appears in Genesis chapter 1 as the means whereby God accomplishes his acts of creation, 'God said, "Let there be light"' (so also 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). The Word of God is God himself in his creative action.

More generally in the Old Testament the Word of God is God in his powerful and effective action in creation (Ps. 33:6), deliverance (Ps. 107:20), and judgment (Ps. 29:3f.; Is. 55:11). It is the 'Word of God' who gives understanding to

the prophets concerning the mind and will of God (cf. Is. 38:4; Je. 1:4; Ezk. 1:3). This thought of God's illumination is developed and personified in the concept of 'wisdom', particularly in the book of Proverbs; cf. 'The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works.... I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began.... I was there when he set the heavens in place.... I was the craftsman at his side.... rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind' (Pr. 8:22–23, 27, 30, 31).

'The Word of God' also served as a common replacement for the divine name when the Greek Old Testament was read in the synagogue, and the speaker required an alternative to express the unmentionable Name of the Lord. Generally in the Old Testament 'Word of God', *logos*, refers to an action rather than an idea.

While primarily rooted in this Hebrew background, *logos* would also speak to John's Greek readership. *Logos* had a long history in Greek philosophy going back at least to Heraclitus (around 500 BC), for whom *logos* was the shaping, ordering and directing principle in the universe. In the first century, Philo, the renowned Jewish teacher in North Africa, who had imbibed much of the Greek philosophical outlook, referred regularly to the *logos* under a wide variety of images, many of which personalized the action of the *logos* (cf. 'the *Logos* is the captain and pilot of the universe'; 'the Father's elder son'; and the like). While some points of contact with Greek usage can be established, John's understanding departs from it at one crucial point. For Greek thought in general the *logos*, as a participant in the divine order, was by that very fact distinct from the material and historical world. By contrast, for John, the Word is revealed precisely in its 'becoming flesh'; cf. 'That Jesus once spoke is more fundamental for its understanding than is the history of Greek philosophy or the story of the westward progress of oriental mysticism; more fundamental even than the first chapter of Genesis or the eighth chapter of Proverbs.' ²

John asserts three things about Jesus as the Word of God in the opening two verses of the gospel:

1. Jesus Christ shares God's eternity. He was *In the beginning*.... By definition, God has no beginning. We can think back only to the moment of creation, *in the beginning*, and perhaps register a vague notion of God's life in himself 'before' time (cf. 17:5, 24: 'the glory I had with you before the world began.... before the creation of the world'). John's contention is that at the point where we reach the boundary of all human conceptualizing we have to begin our speaking about Jesus Christ; he shares God's eternity; *he was with God in the beginning* (2). 'If we ask the fundamental question of the philosopher, "Why is there not nothing?" the answer is that in the "beginning was the Word"'. ³ Although he lived within time as a human being he is not bound by time. He predates all existence; 'there never was when he was not' (Athanasius). However far back we set the beginning of things, and whatever model we employ to describe that origin, according to John, Jesus was present as the presiding Lord of that moment and event (cf. 3).

This truth has major implications for the way we conceive God. Since Jesus is the eternal Word of God (14), and since 'I [Jesus] and the Father are one' (10:30) and 'Anyone who has seen me [Jesus] has seen the Father' (14:9), God is always Jesus-like! 'God is Christlike and in Him is no unChristlikeness at all' (A. M. Ramsey). This is important for the way we read the Old Testament. The significance of this opening phrase of John is that the God who speaks in the Old Testament, who entered into covenant with his people Israel, and inspired and moved the prophets, was none other than the God known in Jesus Christ. God has not changed or evolved. Jesus Christ was always at the heart of God.

It also has implications for the way we understand God's electing his people to salvation (a truth we shall meet at a number of points in this gospel). The God who elects is not 'prior to' Jesus Christ. Hence there is no God 'behind the back' of Christ, so to speak, who may yet say 'no' to us on the day of judgment, despite our having heard Jesus say 'yes' to us as we embraced him as our Saviour. The Son no less than the Father is the electing God.

2. Jesus Christ was eternally with God (verse 1: *and the Word was with God*). *With* here is literally 'towards'. Many scholars have seen an indication in this preposition of an intimate relationship between God and the Word (or, in the common conceptuality of the gospel, between the Father and the Son). A. T. Robertson suggests 'the Word was face to face with God'. ⁴ Basil Atkinson ⁵ refers to a 'sense of home'; 'the Word was in God's home'. Certainly if the wisdom motif is part of the hinterland of the *logos* concept there is a moving sense of intimacy expressed in Proverbs 8:22, 30: 'The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work,' (see footnote *c* in NIV); 'I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence.'

This may be pressing the limits of the text, but it certainly makes clear the distinct existence of the Word with respect to God. The Word is no mere 'emanation from God' as in much first-century thinking.

3. Jesus Christ is one with God ('the Logos was God ...'; verse 1; cf. 1:18: 'God the Son ...' [see footnote *f* in NIV]; 20:28: 'My Lord and my God'). This phrase unambiguously affirms the deity of Jesus Christ. He is God the Son, one in Godhead with the Father. ⁶ Some discussion has been engendered by the fact that 'God' here does not have a definite article, opening the way for some who deny the deity of Jesus Christ to claim that the correct translation is therefore adjectival rather than nominal, so, 'the Word was God-like', or even, 'divine'; *i.e.* the Word reflects divine or God-like qualities. Similarly others, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, attempt on the basis of this text to drive a wedge between the Father and Son, 'The Word was a god'. ⁷

The grammatical issue has been thoroughly explored in recent years and the traditional translation has been shown to be entirely correct. ⁸ Apart from which, New Testament Greek has a perfectly usable word for 'divine', *theios*, which appears elsewhere in the New Testament. John chooses not to use it. His point is that there is no distinction in essence between God and the Word (or between the Father and the Son). Both are equal in Godhead and therefore equally to be honoured, adored and worshipped; and he says it straightforwardly, *the Word was God*. 'When John says "the Word was God", this must be understood in the light of Jewish pride in monotheism. Even though this writer regarded monotheism as a central tenet in his religion, he yet could not withhold from the Word the designation "God"'. ⁹

By putting the relationship thus, John is also avoiding the error of a complete identification of the two persons. To quote Tasker, ‘the Word does not by himself make up the entire Godhead’, [10] *i.e.* there is more to the Godhead than either the Father, or the Son. We need great care in using ‘more’ here since, as Augustine taught centuries ago, ‘no two persons are greater than any one person’; [11] *i.e.* the Father plus the Son is not greater in deity than the Father alone, or than the Son alone, since both, and both together with the Spirit, are one Godhead. At this point we confront the profound mystery of the Trinity and apprehension moves imperceptibly (but delightedly) into adoration.

What does this tremendous opening verse imply for our approach to Jesus Christ?

1. *The finality of Christ.* Jesus’ place in the being of God is changeless. For evermore he is the Son in and with the Father, and hence the one in whom God is made known to us. In our time pluralism is increasingly the order of the day. This has arisen partly as political and community leaders, struggling with nations and societies torn apart by religious division, attempt to achieve a new social concord through affording equal status to the various world faiths. In addition the communications revolution has made it increasingly difficult to maintain isolation, and religious intolerance appears in many eyes as almost the ultimate form of sin. Due to these developments Christians come under considerable pressure at times to water down the great historic distinctives of the Christian faith, such as the deity of Christ. Certainly bigotry is never to be encouraged, and respect for those of other persuasions is always appropriate, but we cannot compromise the uniqueness of the revelation of Jesus Christ merely for the sake of an often vague communal harmony. He alone is God come to us. No other can stand alongside him or take his place. The revelation in Jesus Christ is the final revelation. In acknowledging him lies the seeds of true community.

2. *The mystery of Jesus Christ.* Since Jesus Christ is one with God in his being, he shares in the infinity and limitlessness of God. This does not mean we cannot claim to know him, or assert certain final truths about him, but it means that we do not have an exhaustive knowledge of him. This is John’s concern as his gospel closes (*cf.* 20:30; 21:25) and it is implicit from the very first verse. We therefore know him, and yet there is always more to know, more to experience. This is why worship is fundamental to understanding, and why love and knowledge are inseparable.

3. *The centrality of Jesus Christ.* Because Jesus Christ is God himself come to us, he must always be in the centre of our approach to God, our thinking about God, and our relating to God (14:6).

4. *The supremacy of Jesus Christ.* If Jesus Christ shares the nature of God, we are called to worship him without cessation, obey him without hesitation, love him without reservation and serve him without interruption. To him be all glory for ever.

2. Jesus Christ and the created universe (1:3–5)

The eternal Word is here related to creation. John speaks of a two-fold relationship: origin and illumination.

1. Origin (1:3)

Through him all things were made. Love’s instinct is to create; so out of the unique communion of love between ‘God’ and ‘the Word’ (or between ‘the Father’ and ‘the Son’), the universe sprang into existence. John puts this fundamental truth of creation through the Word of God both positively (*Through him all things were made*) and negatively (*without him nothing was made that has been made*). This mediatorial role in creation is one which other New Testament passages similarly attribute to Christ. [1] We note further that while John asserts the intimate involvement of the Word in the creation of the world, he does not specify how this relates to the origin of the universe as described scientifically. His point is the essentially religious and doxological one—the greatness of Christ is shown by his being the creative mediator of the observable universe. Christ is therefore the unifying principle at the heart of all existence. ‘The eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe.’ [2] From the theological perspective, the theory is a person, Jesus Christ.

John stresses the all-inclusive range of the creative activity of the Word: *Through him all things were made* (3). This is apparently the reason for the repetition of the negative clause following, *without him nothing was made that has been made*. John is correcting some first-century notions of the origin of the universe which taught that it was shaped by God out of some pre-existing primeval ‘stuff’, which was in turn the explanation of the presence of evil in the universe. The net effect, however, was to reduce God’s sovereignty in the world, since by this view there are two determining forces in the universe, God and primary matter.

John’s statement about the creating Word is congruent with the notion of creation ‘out of nothing’. [3] Creation ‘out of nothing’ means exactly what it says. The universe came to be, *not* out of some pre-existing material ‘something’, but out of ‘nothing’, non-existence, void. This truth implies the unqualifiable dependence of all things upon the Word of God; *i.e.* the Word is the sustaining and upholding principle of an irreducibly contingent universe. [4] It also means that the universe, while utterly dependent on God, is also fundamentally distinct from him. This is a crucial truth today. Much of New Age thought, [5] influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism, obliterates the distinction between God and the world, [6] leading to the deifying of nature and the claim that God can be experienced directly through nature. This experience of God is not of course in terms of a personal relationship with him, since God has no personal existence apart from the