

The Gospel of John

Part 3

Steve Thompson

UUCF

October 9, 2024

Source

- My source material for this series is John Shelby Spong's The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic (2013)
- Last time we covered the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, and I showed how it was not about a real woman, but is a *symbolic* story in which the woman represents all Samaritans (who were hated by the Jews)
- The well was known as a place where a man goes to find a wife; the story is sandwiched between two stories in Cana (involving marriage), here Jesus is the bridegroom looking for a wife at a well and he wants the Samaritans to join him (symbolized by marriage) in the kingdom of God; the five former “husbands” of the woman symbolize the five countries from which the Assyrians had imported foreigners to intermarry with the Israelites after they conquered the ten northern tribes in 721 BCE (see II Kings 17:24-34)
- Spong: “This is a symbolic conversation about how the unfaithful region of Samaria can be incorporated in the new understanding of Christianity that Jesus is believed to present and about how ancient religious divisions in the human family can be overcome in the new human consciousness that Jesus comes to bring.”

The Fourth Gospel

- Spong says John's gospel played a large role in the development of church dogma and contributed to "dreadful events" such as the heresy hunts and the Inquisition (p. 3)
- The original creed of "Jesus is Messiah" was good in a Jewish context but when it was removed from that context, it was changed to "Jesus is Lord" and that created contention about who Jesus was and this unfortunately has distracted people from thinking about what Jesus actually said
- Spong says the disciples of Jesus would not have recognized the Jesus described in the Apostle's Creed
- Creeds (sadly) were written to construct barriers between people instead of providing inspiring, uplifting ideas
- Spong says these creeds locked Jesus into a pre-modern world of a three-tiered universe (heaven, earth, and hell) as an "invasive, miracle working deity from outer space" and this makes him hard for us to relate to today
- Spong makes it clear that John's gospel, *because it was misunderstood by Gentile Christians three centuries later*, played a major role in the writing and imposition of church dogma and creeds that have been *harmful* for a long time; yet at the same time, *when properly understood*, John's gospel paints a positive portrait of Jesus that we can benefit from today

The Fourth Gospel

- Scholars unfortunately took a wrong turn about a century ago when they attempted to treat John's gospel as Hellenistic/Gnostic writing (Gnosis refers to knowledge)
- Spong thought better of the Gospel of John when he began to see it as a ***Jewish work, and not as Gnostic literature*** influenced by Hellenism; Spong began to see John's gospel as ***Jewish mysticism***
- Spong began to see Jesus as a person who had developed a new "***God consciousness***"; Jesus' claim of oneness with the Father was no longer incarnational but ***mystical*** language
- With this insight opening possible new ways of understanding the Gospel of John, Spong began a five year study of this gospel, reading everything he could find about it
- John's gospel is about "expanded life, abundant life, and ultimately eternal life", but not in the way commonly understood
- John's gospel was written over a period of about 30 years, in different layers, and by different authors
- The quotations of Jesus ***were not really spoken by him***, but nevertheless ***have meaning***; likewise ***none of the miracles actually occurred***
 - "This story is true, but it did not really happen." (Native American?); the purpose and truth of a story is its ***meaning, not historical accuracy***

The Fourth Gospel (Chapter 2)

- To understand what the gospel means, you have to *understand the mind-set of the authors and read their story as they intended it to be read*
- Spong says the notion of an “external deity entering into the flesh of our existence” “is not even close” to what the writer intended (p. 10)
- The Gospel of John went through a *series of editorial revisions* by different authors over a period of years
 - Evidence: contradictions in the text; places in text showing a forced unity; places where additions are not woven in seamlessly
 - The term “Christology” is the issue of “who is Jesus?”
 - Some places in John’s gospel have a “low Christology” in which Jesus is portrayed as a new Moses or a new Elijah, or the prophet of whom Moses spoke (in Deuteronomy); but in other places there is “high Christology” where Jesus is divine, supernatural
- The dualistic “fully human and fully divine” concept (a Greek idea) came to dominance about 300 years later and could not have been the understanding of the authors of the gospel of John (p.12)
- John is believed to include an earlier work (called the “Book of Signs” by modern scholars) that constitutes John chapters 2-11 (almost half the gospel); this portion starts with Jesus turning water into wine and concludes with the raising of Lazarus

The Fourth Gospel

- A “sign” is “depicted as a mighty act, done quite publicly, that *points* to something even bigger and more important” (p.13)
- “signs accounts are filled with strange references, enigmatic words, unusual actions, and dramatically drawn characters, all of which appear to mitigate against these signs ever having been understood as literal events”
- Miracles in the Synoptics are more obscure in John, and are depicted as “signs”; there are many differences between the miracles of the Synoptics and the signs in John
- The stories in John chapters 4, 5, and 6 make more sense geographically if chapters 5 and 6 were to be reversed
- More evidence for the disconnected nature of John is that the “Farewell Discourses” (chapters 13-16, and perhaps 17), in which Jesus turns his attention solely to his disciples as he anticipates his crucifixion, “seem to reflect far more the difficult times that the Johannine community itself would endure near the end of the first century than they do the things Jesus might have said to his disciples before his death” (p. 15)
 - Unlike Mark, Matthew, and Luke, who wrote their gospels *individually*, the authors of the Gospel of John belonged to a *community* (the Johannine community) of Jews who were excommunicated from the Synagogue
 - I get the impression that John’s gospel was written not only *by* but more importantly *for* the Johannine community, who were trying to draw closer to God and trying to avoid the wrath of “the Jews” (synagogue leaders); their gospel was meant to help them interpret who Jesus was, how he related to God, how they should relate to God, etc.; they were not writing with us in mind

How John Differs from the Synoptics

- John differs on many biographical stories in Mark, or Matthew, or Luke:
 - No virgin birth (Matthew and Luke have it)
 - John the Baptist does not baptize Jesus
 - No temptation of Jesus in the wilderness
 - No transfiguration story
 - No short provocative sayings of Jesus, no parables, and no Sermon on the Mount
 - The cleansing of the Temple is early in Jesus' ministry, not at the end as in the Synoptics
 - Jesus spends most of his time in Jerusalem, in contrast to the Synoptics in which he goes to Jerusalem only once (for the Passover and is then crucified)
 - Jesus spends three Passovers in Jerusalem
 - No Last Supper
 - Miracles become "signs" which are "dramatic truths breaking into human consciousness in Jesus"
 - No prayer by Jesus to be spared the crucifixion
 - Instead of suffering on the cross, Jesus is glorified in John's gospel
- John has a "host of memorable characters" not mentioned in other gospels, especially the mysterious "beloved disciple"
- John adds new characteristics to some of the people cited in the Synoptics

Jesus Turns Water into Wine

- The “water into wine” story has the following themes:
 - The transformation of water into wine will occur “on the third day”
 - The six stone jars are meant for Jewish purification
 - The mother of Jesus stands at the nexus of the shortcoming of the purification rites and the *celebration of the new life Jesus came to bring, which is symbolized by a marriage ceremony*
 - The “old” wine is spent, the “new” wine overflows
 - The mother of Jesus pushes him to act, but he tells his “hour has not come”; the word “hour” occurs many times in this gospel and refers to the moment of *death on the cross*, when ‘who he is’ is *revealed*
 - In John 12:23, Jesus announces that “the hour has come for the son of man to be glorified”, referring to his crucifixion
 - The water is turned into wine and the disciples believe in Jesus (John 2:11), the first of several “signs”
 - Mary is not mentioned by name, and not again until the crucifixion
 - Do *not* carry over information from the Synoptics to John

Jesus Turns Water into Wine

- Symbolism of the water into wine sign includes:
 - Jesus is calling Israel to a new (higher) status
 - The wine of the spirit has replaced the waters of purification; purification itself was part and parcel of deliberate separation of Jews from non-Jews; the voluntary separation from Gentiles, part of the “Holiness Code”, was a hallmark of Judaism; Jesus is saying “no” to that idea
 - The “*mother* of the Lord” symbolizes *Israel*, the faith tradition that *gave birth to Christianity*, so she is its “mother”
 - John sees a transition from Israel to Christianity, but for now this transition is a secret; only at the crucifixion will it be revealed who Jesus is
 - This understanding of Jesus as given by the gospel of John is very different from that of the Synoptics

John 2

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. **2** Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. **3** And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, “They have no wine.”

4 Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.”

5 His mother said to the servants, “Whatever He says to you, do *it*.”

6 Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. **7** Jesus said to them, “Fill the waterpots with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. **8** And He said to them, “Draw *some* out now, and take *it* to the master of the feast.” And they took *it*. **9** When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. **10** And he said to him, “Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the *guests* have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!”

11 This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.

12 After this He went down to Capernaum, He, His mother, His brothers, and His disciples; and they did not stay there many days.

John 2

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

13 Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

14 And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. **15** When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. **16** And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" **17** Then His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up."

18 So the Jews answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?"

19 Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

20 Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?"

21 But He was speaking of the temple of His body. **22** Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.

The Fourth Gospel

- The last two chapters of John (21 and 22) also present a problem; Spong writes “There is almost no possibility that the same person wrote both of these mutually contradictory chapters”. (p.15)
- Scholars debate how many authors contributed to John
 - Raymond Brown says five; Urban von Wahlde says three
- Spong outlines the stages of composition
 - First, a deeply *Jewish and Synagogue related stage* written in the mid-70’s when Jesus is seen as Messianic
 - Secondly, text written during the *rising hostility between the followers of Jesus and synagogue leaders*, resulting in the expulsion in the year 88
 - Thirdly, the *rise of Jewish mysticism in response to the need to establish themselves outside the synagogue*; this phase produced the “high Christology”
 - Fourthly, the epilogue (Chapter 21) was by yet another author
- Spong says the second stage led to anti-Semitism since the followers of Jesus referred to the Judaic Jews as “the Jews”, even though both sides were ethnically Jewish; the third stage had ideas that centuries later unfortunately turned into imperialistic Christianity with its strident creeds
- Spong says this third stage has the tension between those who saw Jesus as “God infused human life” and those who thought Jesus was divine

The Fourth Gospel

- The divine claims were later liberalized into a dualistic Greek speaking world which became the basis of creedal exclusiveness
- Spong writes “I believe that this book leads us in an entirely different direction from the one traditional Christianity has followed from Nicea to this day.” (p.19)
- Spong wants his readers to know the meaning of John’s gospel as “a doorway into a new dimension of life”, “a journey into the heart of life”, and into “a new consciousness” and a “whole new understanding of what Christianity is”
- Historically, Christianity arose from Judaism, and the New Testament was written by Jews (except Luke, who was a Jewish convert) and so ***understanding the NT requires a Jewish background; but the Jews rejected Christianity; the Gentiles adopted it, but they lacked the background knowledge to properly interpret the Gospels and other NT books***
- Spong says one must see with Jewish eyes to understand the Gospel of John
- Sadly, over the first few centuries after Jesus lived, the Gentiles, lacking an understanding of anything Jewish, increasingly misinterpreted the gospels and as Christianity diminished among the Jews, there were fewer people who could (or would) stand up and say “Gentiles, you are misunderstanding these gospels!”