

The Gospel of John

Part 4

Steve Thompson

UUCF

October 23, 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 Jesus turning water into wine; the jars, which he instructed be filled with water, represented the Jewish *purification* beliefs, which *put up barriers between the Jews and other people*; the wine that Jesus turned the water into symbolizes the *celebration of breaking down the barriers between people and unifying* all mankind in God's love
 - The wine is a reversal of the water
 - The “old” wine is spent, the “new” wine overflows: the purification rituals lead to isolation, but breaking down barriers between people leads to unity
 - Jesus is calling Israel to a new and higher understanding of God and God's love
 - The “*mother* of the Lord” symbolizes *Israel*, the faith tradition that *gave birth to Christianity*

The Fourth Gospel

- The stages of composition of the Gospel of John
 - First, a deeply *Jewish and Synagogue related stage* written in the mid-70's
 - 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*
 - Fourthly, the epilogue (Chapter 21) was by yet another author
- 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!”

The Jewishness of John's Gospel

- Greek thought had some influence, but the Gospel of John is very Jewish
- John diminishes the role of John the Baptist (not even calling him that) by writing “He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.” (John 1:8) and he is not said to have baptized Jesus
- The interrogation of the “Baptist” by Jewish leaders involves questions: “Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet?” and replies “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, to make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23 from Isaiah 40:3) and “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” that *only Jewish people would understand*
- Later, Andrew tells Peter “We have found the Messiah” and Philip says to Nathaniel “We have found him of whom Moses in the law ... wrote”; and later there is an allusion to Jacob's ladder in Genesis
- Spong's point of all this is the *thoroughly Jewish (not Greek) nature of the Gospel of John*
- The gospel reveals a deep familiarity with Jerusalem, the synagogue, Jewish Palestine, Jewish holidays and liturgy; those not familiar with all this will miss many nuances
- Understanding this gospel requires understanding Jewish history, culture, and mindset; the Gentiles who adopted Christianity lacked this understanding

The Jewishness of all the Gospels

- Jesus was Jewish and his early followers were all Jewish, but because of Paul, the message of Jesus was spread to Gentiles, among whom it survived
- *The Christianity we have today comes from the Gentile followers* of Jesus, not the Jewish followers; *but the written Gospels (and NT) come from Jewish authors (and Luke as a convert, writing in the same style)*
- Unfortunately, the “handoff” of literature written by Jews and adopted by the Gentiles who later formulated Christian doctrine, created *huge misunderstandings* in how the books of the New Testament were to be interpreted
 - All the Gospels *require an understanding of Judaism* to interpret the meaning of their stories (which for the Synoptics means Jewish midrash)
- The *Gentile lack of understanding* of Judaism and of Jewish thought has severely hampered a proper understanding of Jesus
- On the other hand, the *parables* of Jesus are quite clear; they represent the “*authentic*” Jesus, yet Christians over the ages have failed to see the discrepancy between the love of God taught in the parables versus the doctrines centered on the crucifixion of Jesus
 - I think this reveals human weakness: the parables challenge us, the substitutionary atonement (wrongly) comforts us
- Christians have failed to understand that the biographical stories, such as the virgin birth and the miracle stories, are midrashic, and instead mistakenly think they are literal

Nicodemus

- We now look at the story of Nicodemus - what does it mean to be born of the spirit?
- This story *contrasts those with a literal mindset to people who are open to a new consciousness*; Nicodemus, a purely fictitious character, he symbolizes the former; Jesus calls us to be the latter
- Nicodemus is described as a Pharisee who is inquisitive about Jesus; he symbolizes all the Jews who were impressed by Jesus, but were ultimately unwilling to let go of Judaism enough to be transformed by Jesus into a higher human consciousness
- John describes Nicodemus as coming to Jesus “by night”, with the dark of night contrasting against Jesus and the light of day
- Like other religious leaders, Nicodemus is afraid of an uncontrolled God who acts outside the channels that people like to assume God works through; *the birth of a new consciousness is outside the realm of how Nicodemus can see God acting*
 - People deny that they can control God, but at the same time they think God must act in accordance with their historical understanding of how God acts, and in a sense they cannot accept that God would break what they consider to be God’s norms; the synagogue leaders of John’s time cannot accept the idea that God would send a Messiah like Jesus
- Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless he is born again, he cannot see the realm of God

Nicodemus

- The author of John, in using the term “born again”, which can also be translated as “born from above” or “born anew”, is speaking about a new dimension, not a new religious status
- Spong says Greek dualistic thinking divided life into a higher form of religion and God, and a lower form of humanity and desire, but mystical thought does not see it that way
- As the Gospel of John was interpreted centuries later using Greek theology, it was thought that there was an external realm of God to which Jesus belonged and that he had left it to enter the realm of flesh and blood, which Spong says is to misunderstand this gospel completely; Jesus is not a divine visitor
- But this idea of Jesus as divine visitor lead the church to adopt core beliefs such as the incarnation and the idea that Jesus was the second person in a divine Trinity
- Spong says the author of John’s gospel would have understood none of this; as a Jewish mystic, he saw Jesus as one filled with God’s loving spirit, showing a new dimension to human life, a new consciousness
- So the author has Jesus tell Nicodemus that for him to understand Jesus, he has to enter a transformative experience, to see with insight, to be open to a new perspective
- But Nicodemus, who enjoys the darkness of his own religious night, cannot make sense of this; he is unwilling to let go of his security (Judaism)

Nicodemus

- The author of John has Nicodemus say: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”; Nicodemus is thinking literally; Jesus, speaking figuratively, is talking above Nicodemus’s head
- The author (John) wants the reader to see the *absurdity* of Nicodemus’s thinking
- This suggests to me that the author has already seen more literal interpretation (probably of the Synoptic Gospels) than he can tolerate
- Jesus tries again: “Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the realm of God.” Spong says water is not referring to baptism, and spirit is not referring to a religious experience, contrary to modern claims. Instead, “born of water” is simply to be born into this world and “born into the spirit” is to step into a new dimension of humanity. This is why Jesus says “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit”. The spirit “that blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or where it goes.” It is a mysterious, mystical experience.
- Spong says it is human to be self-conscious, which is to live in time, remember the past, to anticipate the future, to embrace finitude and mortality. It allows your mind to roam beyond the limits of your body, while your body is bound in time and space. One can look out at life from the perspective of self, which is distinct from the world. It is to feel loneliness, anxiety, and to struggle to survive. It is to see oneself as related to the whole, but without losing one’s identity. It is not to be a raindrop in the sea of God. Self-consciousness does open the possibility of escaping all boundaries and touching, seeing, and experiencing a universal consciousness, a radical new awareness of connectedness, a mystical sense of identity with that which is ultimate.

Nicodemus

- But Nicodemus cannot understand: “How can these things be?”
- The author then has Jesus liken himself to the bronze serpent Moses had made and lifted up above the people in the wilderness when God sent fiery serpents to bite people who were unfaithful to Him during the Exodus (Numbers 21:4-9). The bronze serpent was put on a pole, and those bitten who looked upon it lived. This is the origin of the symbol of a serpent that signifies the medical profession today. John sees Jesus as the serpent on the pole (on the cross) who draws the venom out, restoring wholeness. Notice that this has nothing to do with sin, forgiveness, sacrifice, etc., which are elements of the substitutionary atonement.
- Spong says the author is referring to the “throne mysticism” of early Judaism. Later Jesus will be enthroned on wood, on the cross, through which he will reflect a new humanity. The cross is the doorway to a new consciousness, a new oneness with all that God is, a doorway into that which is eternal. (I don’t understand this.)
- Jesus reveals God to be the source of love that comes not to judge human inadequacy, but to open people’s eyes to see that they are a part of who and what God is, so that they can enter the eternity of God; Judgment is not a divine act, but a human choice; judgment means to prefer darkness to light, security over freedom, and be blind to what can be.
- Jesus calls Nicodemus to be different, but he is too afraid to respond. We will see Nicodemus twice more in this gospel.

Nicodemus (John 3)

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

4 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

5 Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. **6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

10 Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? **11** Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. **12** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Nicodemus (John 3)

13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. **14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. **16** For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. **17** For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. **18** “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. **19** And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. **20** For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. **21** But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

Nicodemus

- John 3:8 - “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
 - Spong does not comment on this verse, but it seems to me that perhaps the author is saying that, opposed to the concrete, physical rituals of the Jews that they perform to please God, Jesus is saying that God’s mysterious spirit of love is what we should strive for; once can experience it, but it is hard to describe
- John 3:16 (heralded at NFL games): “For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whosoever shall believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
- The doctrine of “substitutionary atonement” is based on John 3:16 and commonly interpreted as: if you believe Jesus died (as a sacrifice) for your sins, God will send you to heaven
- This idea is loved by many Christians because it provides an easy way out: Believe Jesus died for your sins and presto! You are forgiven by God and you go to heaven! What could be easier? What could be better? And to top it off, all these people you hate are going to hell because they do not believe it! This is reassuring to people fearful of a wrathful God! But was this what Jesus taught? No!