

The Gospel of John

Part 6

Steve Thompson

UUCF

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Source

- My source material for this series is John Shelby Spong's The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic (2013)
- Jesus was about *enhancing life by leading people to greater consciousness*
- Chapters 2-11 of the Gospel of John are called the “Book of Signs” by modern scholars; this section of the gospel is believed to be the first portion written; the “signs” are similar to miracles, but not the same as the “miracles” of the Synoptics
- Spong: “Jesus’ death will be interpreted by this gospel as *light being extinguished* by darkness in a world where God has been reduced to the status of one who is primarily the creator of religious rules, not the one who will call us into radical humanity. For John the *religious need to diminish and even to destroy life*, a need that seems to be regularly present in religious history, is little more than an attack upon God, whom he perceives as the source of life.”
- There is a huge difference between a creative God who wants us to thrive, and a judgmental God who makes certain demands of us to satisfy Himself
- John uses mythological characters to set the stage where *Jesus can demonstrate the key ideas about God and himself that the author wants to make*, just as great novelists create fictional settings where their hero acts to show the points the author wants to make about life

Literalism vs Mysticism

- Spong writes that “A preponderance of biblical scholarship now indicates that”:
 - John the Baptist had no sense that he was ever a forerunner of Jesus
 - Jesus never literally drove the money-changers out of the Temple
 - He never said any of the ‘I AM’ sayings
 - He never restored sight to a man who was born blind
 - He never raised from the dead a man named Lazarus
- Spong, Ch. 7: “Some deeply religious people even respond to the insights that challenge a literal understanding of Christianity with anger, a dead giveaway that it is their religious security that has been disturbed, not religious truth.”
- So why does John’s Gospel (and some of the Synoptics) have these stories?
- Answer: the author’s literary style is to convey his message through non-literal stories and “signs” that show the *sharp contrast* between Jesus’ understanding of God and the story’s character’s understanding of God; some characters are shown as learning from Jesus, some not

The Book of Signs

- The Book of Signs, which constitutes most of chapters 2-11 of the Gospel of John (almost half of the gospel), should be thought of as a series of stories about fictional characters that are *symbolize groups of individuals*
 - Some of the symbolic characters the author includes in the stories are familiar names from the Synoptics, but often they are described differently than Mark, Matthew, or Luke described them
 - Some characters are entirely new
- Spong, page 13: “the sign 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 that occurred inside the normal flow of history”
- Jesus is talking above people’s heads in these stories; it is as if the author of John is making the character’s literal interpretation of what Jesus tells them so outrageous as to *force the reader to look for a symbolic meaning*; this would encourage the Johannine community to think of the mystical meaning of what Jesus said and reject literal interpretations

The Book of Signs

- The Book of Signs consists of these stories
 - The turning of water into wine in Cana of Galilee (first sign)
 - The Samaritan woman at the well
 - The story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus and being told he must be “born again”
 - The healing of the Gentile official’s son (second sign)
 - The man crippled for 38 years (third sign)
 - The feeding of the multitude (fourth sign)
 - Jesus walks on the water (fifth sign)
 - Lazarus is raised from the dead (sixth sign)
 - Andrew and Philip

The Gentile Official's Son

- Nicodemus comes by night, is unable to hear the message of Jesus, and leaves to return to the shadows
- The Samaritan woman sees Jesus in the light of day, accepts his message, and becomes an evangelist
- Now the gospel author introduces another fictional character. Like the woman at the well, he is not named. He is a “an official” from Capernaum; so is he a Gentile? Spong thinks so. The man’s son is ill, bringing to mind two stories (Matthew 8:5-10) and Luke 7:1-10) about a centurion with a sick servant (not a son) whom Jesus heals at a distance.
- ***This story is about Jesus healing the rift between Jews and Gentiles.*** In doing so, Jesus defines God and faith in new ways.
- Again, there is a connection to the wedding in Cana. The author states that Jesus is back in Cana where he turned water into wine (John 4:46), and also says this is the ***second*** sign Jesus did.
- Three key themes in this story of the Gentile official:
 - Jesus again shows himself to be a ***breaker of barriers*** between people
 - Jesus tells us ***God is a permeating presence*** that calls us beyond our limits
 - Jesus shows that faith is not believing in the right articles, but “is a source of trust that invites people to walk in a new experience of reality”

The Gentile Official's Son (John 4)

46 So Jesus came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. **47** When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. **48** Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you *people* see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.” **49** The nobleman said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies!” **50** Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your son lives.” So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way. **51** And as he was now going down, his servants met him and told *him*, saying, “Your son lives!” **52** Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better. And they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” **53** So the father knew that *it was* at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, “Your son lives.” And he himself believed, and his whole household. **54** This again *is* the second sign Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.

The Gentile Official's Son

- Spong has a good discussion on how tribalism is natural, how it exists to some degree in everyone, how it is a survival tool, how people fear others who are different, how tribalism fuels human rivalries, that the Jewish-Gentile gap became more prominent during the Exile, how each of us considers our own ethnicity to be “normal” and how people who are different are considered abnormal, that worshipping a foreign god carries the risk of losing the protection of a deity, how xenophobia is a natural human survival technique, and that we cannot lay it aside because it is part of what it means to be human; he says we can escape it only by escaping the limits of our humanity; ***thus making the escape is a transformational moment in which we cross a boundary and enter a new level of consciousness and begin to perceive the reality of human oneness***
- As I read this, it struck me as the first example I have seen in which he states what he means by the terms “new level of consciousness” and “human oneness”; this despite the fact that this is in my second reading of this book, so somehow I missed it the first time; I guess I was looking for something grander (now I wonder what else I missed!)

The Gentile Official's Son

- Notice the progression of the characters in this and the last two stories: first Nicodemus is a story about some Jews versus other *Jews*; then the woman at the well, a story about Jews versus *Samaritans*, mixed race Jews who claimed ancestry with Abraham and the Patriarchs, and now Jews versus *Gentiles*; each story is about a group further from Judaism
- The Gentile official has a deep need (a sick son), so he approaches Jesus, thus crossing the tribal divide; he wants Jesus to come to his home, but Jesus challenges his hopes by saying “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” The official repeats his plea, and Jesus replies “Go, your son lives.” Spong says God was present in Jesus, but not confined to him. God is a mystical, permeating presence in the world.
- Spong says it is difficult for religious people to embrace “an unbounded God”. Throughout history people have thought of God as a being with supernatural power, but one located in one place. People located God above the sky in a three-tiered universe. People asserted that God’s words were captured in their scriptures. Then that God’s nature could be captured in our creeds, doctrines, and dogmas. We expected God to live within our limits. But as scientific knowledge expanded, and shattered prior assumptions about the universe, some people (those most rigidly tied to literal assumptions) acted as if God had died. In some cases, people who then questioned the creeds and doctrines were considered heretical, some even being burned at the stake.
- The idea of “theism” (God as a being) began to die, causing people to either become atheists or find another definition of God.

The Gentile Official's Son

- Paraphrasing Spong: In Jewish *mysticism*, God had been viewed in the past as analogous to “wind” or “breath”, both of which animated life, but neither of which could be captured in human form. No God above the sky does not mean there is no God. Instead God was perceived as present in Jesus, but that does not require him to be an incarnation of God as later creeds would claim. It rather means that the spiritual presence we call God permeates the universe, becoming audible or visible in the words or actions of someone doing the will of God. Many people feel a need to control God, but Jewish mysticism says no to that impulse. The author of John's gospel is saying, in the story of the Gentile official, that God was present in Jesus, but was not bound to Jesus. In this “sign”, the separation of Gentile from Jew ends. And faith is redefined: the official “believed the word Jesus spoke to him and went on his way” (John 4:50). Faith is not believing in creeds, doctrines, or dogmas. Faith is trusting the divine presence to be in every moment. Faith cannot give us certainty. Faith is having the courage to walk into the unknown, to confront whatever life brings us, despite the lack of certainty. There is no such thing as “the faith”. No claim by anyone to possess the only way to God, to be the single infallible authority empowered to speak for God or to hold the only inerrant source of God's revelation is ever valid.

Wisdom Literature

- “Wisdom was perceived as an aspect of the God who was immanent, within them, a God who could touch their lives deeply. To walk in wisdom for the Jews came to mean to walk in or with God. To learn wisdom was to learn God. To listen to wisdom was to listen to God.” (p. 56); God began to be understood as a “being” present with them, and as a permeating presence in all of life; wisdom became personal
- God’s will was proclaimed in the Law, but in wisdom God’s life was lived; wisdom became an incarnation of God, but this idea is different from the later understanding of incarnation; the difference here is this: Jesus is *not a fundamentally different being who is masquerading as a human; instead he is a human demonstrating that humans can become God-infused with the permeating presence of God’s love*
- Proverbs 8 tells us there is no escaping the divine presence of wisdom; wisdom helps us understand ourselves and a journey into self is the same as a journey into God; in wisdom is life, and the absence of wisdom is death
- Spong says all the *major themes of John’s prologue* (Jesus as the “word”) are found in the book of *Proverbs*“ as the attributes of a God experienced as immanent in the heart of life itself” (p. 57)
- “Both the ‘word’ and ‘wisdom’ were calls to life, to love, and to being.”
- God is to be understood as a verb (not a being) calling us to be what we were created to be

John and Mysticism

- John is “expressing a mystical unity that human life can have with God” and asserting that this is uniquely demonstrated in Jesus of Nazareth
- The author of John believed that Jesus was calling us to that life expanding oneness with God
 - John 1:51 refers to Jacob’s ladder in Genesis 28, where he sees angels ascending and descending the ladder connecting heaven and earth, as God and human life came together
- One form of Jewish mysticism was “enthronement mysticism”, and John’s Gospel transformed the death of Jesus on the cross into a mystical enthronement in which Jesus is glorified (an idea I do not yet understand)
- In John 14:9, the author has Jesus say “If you have seen me, you have seen God.” I interpret this as “you have seen how God’s presence can transform a person”.
- In Jesus, the Gentile official found access to the oneness of life. Breaking human barriers opens us to life. Irenaeus asserted “The glory of God is man fully alive.”