

# The Gospel of John

## Part 7

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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)
- In chapters 2-11 of the Gospel of John (the “Book of Signs”), 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*
- 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*
- In John 14:9, the author has Jesus say “If you have seen me, you have seen God.” I interpret this as “not that Jesus IS God, but in Jesus 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.*”

# John and his Community

- The (second) Temple was destroyed in the year 70 by the Romans during the Jewish revolt; the Jewish religious leaders were left controlling the synagogue
- The Synoptics were written for *all* Jews, not for a specific community
- The Johannine community was a different group of people living in very different circumstances from Gentile followers living elsewhere and the Gospel of John is different: it was written *by and for this community* who had seen that the Synoptics had *not* convinced Jewish people that Jesus was the Messiah
- This community was excommunicated from Judaism by these Jewish religious leaders in about the year 88 AD; this *excommunication* was the result of a *dispute* between the Jewish followers of Jesus and the orthodox Jews who did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah
- This dispute is over the issue of what does it mean to follow God, with one side saying Jews are to *obey the Laws* handed down through Moses, and the followers of Jesus saying that those Laws separate people from one another and thus are to be ignored since *all of humanity is to be loved as equal children of God*

# The Dispute in the Gospel of John

- The Johannine community believed that *Jesus was a God-infused man* who exemplified the way to achieve a greater level of *human consciousness* by becoming an ever more loving person who broke all human imposed barriers that separated classes of people, especially barriers imposed by Jewish law
  - For example, when asked what is the greatest Law, Jesus did not cite the Torah, but replied “to love God and love your neighbor as yourself”
- The orthodox leaders believed that God had spoken through Moses and that to believe in God was to obey the Law, including the Holiness Code and many other sets of Laws from the Torah that separated Jews from Gentiles
- Jesus spoke with God’s authority and greatly challenged the Jewish religious hierarchy; they saw him as a threat to all they stood for and so they had the Romans kill him
- 50-60 years later the Johannine community is following in Jesus’s footsteps and encountering the same dispute with religious leaders that Jesus had decades earlier; their story is being told by the author(s) of the Gospel of John who are writing *symbolic* stories about Jesus that did not literally happen, but that do *truthfully portray the message of Jesus* and represent the understanding of that community of believers about what it means to follow Jesus and to do God’s will
- In a sense, they feel that Jesus’ story is their story

# Anti-Semitism in the Gospel John

- Spong makes it clear that the anti-Semitism that springs forth from the Gospel of John is not only wrong, but comes about only by misunderstanding the use of the term “the Jews” in the Gospel
- Spong states that the term “the Jews” used in the Gospel is not an ethnic reference, but is a theological reference; the fact is that Jesus was a Jew, his disciples were all Jews, Paul was a Jew, other NT authors (except Luke) were Jews, the author of John was a Jew, and the Johannine community he wrote for were all Jewish
- The term “the Jews” merely refers to the orthodox Jewish leaders of the synagogue; the ones who expelled the Johannine community
- Why that term was used I do not know, but the gospel writer and his followers fully believed that Jesus was the Messiah and their dispute was over that issue; they in no way rejected Judaism itself; they fully believed that *Jesus as the Messiah was God’s intended extension of Judaism*, and their argument was with the Jewish leadership who rejected the “Jesus is Messiah” notion
- The author John wrote a Gospel in which several of the stories were *deliberately written to be non-literal*, but ironically *are taken literally* by some people today, exacerbating the misunderstanding because they then believe things even more extreme than portrayed in the Synoptics

# Misunderstanding the Bible

- A few misunderstandings:
- The two creation stories in Genesis 1-2; Augustine did not understand that there were two distinct stories; we now know that the two stories were written almost 400 years apart, with the second one (J, in Genesis 2) being the first of the two written; he overlooked their contradictions (such as order of creation of man, woman, and animals); he concluded that man had “fallen” into sin and ruined God’s perfect creation and thus God needed to provide a mechanism to overcome this sinful condition that separated man from God and so God sent Jesus to serve as a sacrifice for human sin so that God could be appeased, and thus he promoted the doctrine of “substitutionary atonement”; it became standard Christian doctrine
  - A much more plausible interpretation of the J creation story (Adam, Eve, serpent, fruit) is that it is a story of the *origin of human consciousness* (not the physical body), and that nascent consciousness allowed people to be aware of evil, something animals do not understand; that is, the story of Adam and Eve is a story about people *becoming moral beings*
- Augustine failed to recognize J’s creation story as being about the birth of human consciousness, and failed to see the life of Jesus as a demonstration of God’s transformational expansion of human consciousness

# Literalism vs Mysticism

- Spong, Chapter 7: “One cannot be mystical in one’s approach to God and still be literal about the symbols one uses for God. Indeed, the very idea of the mystical means that words cannot capture it. Mysticism expands words beyond their normal limits and calls the mystic into the ultimate experience of wordlessness. The best that words can do is to point beyond themselves to a new reality that words can never contain or even describe. Literalism suggests that words, which are only pointers, can in fact be made concrete, thus establishing assumptions that can never be demonstrated. Literalism commits us to the presumption that any religious form can not only capture truth, but also explain it fully. It is out of the distortions that literalism inevitably creates that most religious violence originates. Religious literalism requires infallible leaders and inerrant scriptures. Literalism is thus always the enemy of faith, which is ultimately the opposite of certainty. John’s Gospel, perhaps more than any other part of the biblical text, *makes a mockery of literalism*, constantly holding it up to ridicule. If one seeks to impose any kind of literalism on this book, one closes one’s eyes to its profound and yet affirming meaning. Mystical eyes can never be literal eyes, and this gospel is the product of mystical eyes - more specifically, Jewish mystical eyes.”

# The Book of Signs in John 2-11

- 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)
  - Andrew and Philip
  - The feeding of the multitude (fourth sign)
  - Jesus walks on the water (fifth sign)
  - The man born blind (sixth sign)
  - Lazarus is raised from the dead (seventh sign)

# The Man Crippled for 38 Years

- In this story, Jesus goes to the pool known as Bethzatha (or Bethesda) near the Sheep's Gate portal, where there are five porticoes in which many invalids, described by John as blind, lame, and paralyzed, lie waiting for miraculous cures. Folklore has it that the water in this pool periodically becomes "troubled" and has healing power when it does. The belief is that the first person to enter the water when this occurs will be healed.
- Among the throng of people needing healing, Jesus meets a man crippled for 38 years. Spong believes the 38 years has some special importance relating to historical events, but is unable to pinpoint the events or the timeframe. Spong subtracts 38 years from the year 88 (expulsion) to get the year 50, but knows of no event in that year; I wonder if perhaps this story may have been written around the year 68, in which case the 38 years would have been since the resurrection of Jesus; people were blind to the resurrection, and have been since then
- Jesus asks him: "Do you want to be healed?" The man responds with an excuse: "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled". Indecision. He avoids directly answering the question. Spong says "stepping out of the familiar religious forms of yesterday and into the post-religious freedom of tomorrow is never easy."
- Today many Christians fall for ideas such as a wrathful view of God, the inerrancy of the Bible, substitutionary atonement, etc. In John's time, the issues differed, but people faced similar challenges: a choice between the security of religious "orthodoxy" (safety in numbers) or an enlightened alternative. Earlier in this gospel, Nicodemus struggled with this challenge and failed. Now the man crippled for 38 years faces the same challenge.

# The Man Crippled for 38 Years

- The story of the crippled man involves the religious authorities and thus explicitly shows the similarities of the dispute Jesus had with them in his time to the dispute the Johannine community had with the religious authorities of their time
- Spong says Jesus cuts through the man's fears by saying "Rise, take up your pallet and walk." The man does so. He has passed the *initial* challenge of thinking outside religious boundaries, unlike Nicodemus. Spong says "New life and new wholeness are challenged by the religious rules of the past." The man now trembles because "he can no longer hide from his fears inside the excuses of his past." He will be challenged *again*, this time by the religious leaders who observed him carrying his bedding on the Sabbath, which violates the law of not working on the Sabbath. They charge him with violating the Sabbath, and he weakly responds by saying that Jesus told him to take up his pallet and walk. He is hiding behind the excuse of just following orders. When asked who told him this, the man truthfully says he does not know (Jesus had withdrawn).
- Later Jesus finds the crippled man in the Temple and gave him *one more chance* to choose faith over fear. But instead, the man went to the religious leaders and identified Jesus as his healer. The religious leaders now accuse Jesus of violating the Sabbath, and he replies: "My Father is working still", implying that God was working through him (and on the Sabbath!). And he audaciously added "I am working" (John 5:17). This of course upsets the religious leaders who assume God can only work through proper religious channels according to their rules.

# The Man Crippled for 38 Years

- The author has Jesus refer to the final “sign”, the raising of Lazarus from the dead: in John 5:25 he has Jesus say “The hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of God and those who hear it will live”, followed in the next verse by “The Father has life in himself” and He has “granted to the son also to have life in himself.” Notice “the hour is coming” phrase, which connects to Jesus telling his mother in the first “sign” story “My hour has not come”; the “hour” refers to the time of his crucifixion, which John believes is his glorification. There is a progression of “the hour” approaching throughout the gospel.
- Spong says it is clear that *the crippled man did not grasp his new-found freedom from religious rules*. He acted audaciously in rising and walking, but then grew anxious of his own audacity and fearful of leaving the comfortable rules behind. He reported to the religious leaders that it was Jesus who healed him because he needed their approval, and he caved in to their demand to know. He was *too afraid of the isolation of his new freedom*. His action of reporting Jesus created new persecution for Jesus. *The crippled man represents members of the Johannine community who faltered and returned to pure Judaism*, to avoid excommunication from the security they had known their entire lives. “They could not embrace this new reality. They could not bear the anxiety of the uncertainty that maturity always requires. They wanted rules, scriptures that were authoritative, sacred traditions that were set and fixed. They actually wanted to hide in something less than life. They could not make the transition Jesus required.”

# A Different Understanding of God

- Spong and this gospel has made me ponder how our understanding of God needs to change; instead of thinking of God as a miracle working being, the idea of God as a *spirit* that can enter a person and transform that person's life makes sense
- I imagine two realms: the upper realm is of the spirit; the lower realm is the body, of practical, physical living; I believe our bodies evolved, but our souls are God-given
  - We obviously have to take care of our bodies; and we are focussed overwhelmingly on this lower physical realm, and in it we speak and think literally; our language has developed literal words that concretely describe what we mean; as we live in this realm, it is not natural to recognize that the upper realm even exists
  - But if God is a spirit, our vocabulary is poorly equipped to speak of God and the spiritual realm; hence the term "mystical"; what this gospel is trying to tell us is that we need to break away from our understanding of God as a physical, miracle working being and instead think of God as inhabiting this spiritual realm; by imitating Jesus (being loving, compassionate, seeking justice, etc.) God can enable us to dwell in this upper realm of greater human consciousness and understanding
- The Book of Signs is a set of fictional stories concocted to portray *groups* of people, each represented by a single character in one of the stories; these characters represent people who hear Jesus, but react differently to his message; Jesus is calling them to a better life; Jesus is calling people living in darkness to step into the light, to leave religious certainty and enter a higher understanding, to reach up to the upper realm in which a greater spirit transforms our lives; some step into the light, some do not; of those who do, some become scared and retreat (like the crippled man) into the darkness; some become emboldened enough to stay in the light
- Read the following story *slowly*

# The Man Crippled for 38 Years

**5** After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **2** Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. **3** In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. **4** For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. **5** Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. **6** When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been *in that condition* a long time, He said to him, “Do you want to be made well?”

**7** The sick man answered Him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me.”

**8** Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” **9** And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked.

And that day was the Sabbath. **10** The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, “It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed.”

**11** He answered them, “He who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your bed and walk.’ ”

**12** Then they asked him, “Who is the Man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk’?”

**13** But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in *that* place. **14** Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.”

**15** The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

**16** For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. **17** But Jesus answered them, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.”

# The Man Crippled for 38 Years

**5 18** Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.

**19** Then Jesus answered and said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. **20** For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel.

**21** For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to *them*, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. **22** For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, **23** that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

**24** “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. **25** Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. **26** For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, **27** and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. **28** Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice **29** and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. **30** I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

# The Man Crippled for 38 Years

**5 31** “If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. **32** There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true. **33** You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. **34** Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. **35** He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light. **36** But I have a greater witness than John’s; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. **37** And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. **38** But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. **39** You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. **40** But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. **41** “I do not receive honor from men. **42** But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you. **43** I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. **44** How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that *comes* from the only God? **45** Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is *one* who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. **46** For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. **47** But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?”

# The Man Crippled for 38 Years

- “John is painting picture of new life being born. He is not writing about theology and religion; he is creating a vision of what expanded life might look like and what a new identity and a universal consciousness might symbolize. This gospel is about the *ancient and time bound Jewish understanding of God* (the old) moving into the *mystical experience* of life unfettered by fear or the needs that human beings have for religious security (the new). Not everyone can bear this vision, but those who can, Jesus suggests, will enter a new dimension of life which is eternal.”
- These stories are not only about these two choices of old and new, but about various reactions people have when given the chance to transition from old to new. Some, like the man crippled for 38 years, briefly experience the new, but then retreat to the old.
- This concludes the third sign in the Gospel of John
- One way the “signs” in John differ from the miracles in the Synoptics is that they are *exaggerated*: the sign of turning water into wine is not just a few glasses of wine, but 150 gallons!; the crippled man was crippled *for 38 years*; later, Lazarus is not just dead, but *dead four days, buried, and stinking!*