JOHN

Richard A. Burridge

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

A devotional commentary for study and preaching

Foreword *by* The Archbishop *of* Canterbury

The Gospel according to St John is, by common consent, one of the most inexhaustibly fertile biblical texts. Generation after generation, some of the greatest Christian minds have explored their theological commitments through meditation on this book. For myself, the theme that most clearly comes across in its pages is this: we are told right at the start that the eternal Word who becomes flesh in Jesus exists 'in the bosom of the Father'—next to the Father's heart, as some have translated it; and from then on, the gospel relates how by relation with Jesus we may come to see 'where he lives'—like the first apostles—and to make our home there.

But that journey to the Father's heart through Jesus Christ is a journey to and through the cross, where Jesus is lifted up for the world to see and his glory is displayed in the deepest weakness and apparent defeat. The follower of Jesus, called to be where Jesus is, in his glory, walks towards his cross.

The ministry of any Christian pastor, but perhaps especially the ministry of the bishop, who is charged with calling the Church together in Jesus' Name and Spirit, is about leading human beings home to the Father's heart. And so the minister must become at home there, must learn what it is to be where Jesus is, 'abiding' with and in him, finding the glory in the struggle and apparent failure. It is a message that a wounded and struggling Church needs to hear, and that we as bishops need to absorb ever more deeply.

The commentary that is being offered for reflection is one of the finest and most accessible of modern studies, looking not at individual verses in isolation but at the narrative pattern of each chapter and of the gospel as a whole. It is designed to help us be drawn into the flow of Jesus' life as St John records it, so that our stories are caught up in that of Our Lord.

I am deeply grateful to Richard Burridge for allowing us to use his work at the Lambeth Conference. We are also much indebted to the Bible Reading Fellowship for their partnership in issuing the special Lambeth edition of the commentary.

May these pages open up for you the Good News of God's living and everlasting Word, made flesh for our life and salvation.

+ *Rowan Cantuar:*
Lambeth Palace

Preface *to the* Third Edition

So much has happened since I wrote the first edition of this commentary in 1998. Then it was one of the first to be published in a new series for the Bible Reading Fellowship to be called *The People's Bible Commentary*, of which I was also privileged to be one of the three General Editors. It is a joy that within ten years we were able to complete the project for the whole Bible in 32 volumes, including scholars from a wide range of countries, different backgrounds and various Christian denominations. Yet the format of each volume has remained the same, providing double-page readings of each book, passage by passage, either for daily use or to assist with study groups, talks or sermons. It has been a delight as I go around the country taking study days and training sessions to find that my commentary and the series as a whole has become greatly appreciated by clergy and lay people alike. Indeed, over the last decade, I have found myself regularly turning to many volumes in the series, either for my own personal Bible study or as part of my preparation for preaching.

I was honoured that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the planning group, led by Professor Gerald West from Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, should have chosen this commentary as preparatory reading for the Lambeth Conference 2008. Accordingly, we produced a slightly updated second edition, which was then sent to all the Anglican bishops throughout the world with a daily reading plan for the six months February to July 2008. Archbishop Rowan himself began the Conference by leading the bishops in three days' retreat with addresses on St John, while the rest of the Conference started each day with study of John's gospel in small groups. I hope and pray that we may follow the bishops' example in our own reading of the fourth gospel. I am particularly thankful to Archbishop Rowan for allowing us to include a revised version of his Foreword at the start of this third edition.

I remain deeply grateful to Richard Fisher and Naomi Starkey at the Bible Reading Fellowship, and to our colleagues at Hendrickson for the American version, and I pray that this new edition may help us love Jesus and each other more.

Richard A. Burridge

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Acknowledgments

I learned so much while I was writing this book, despite my years of preaching and teaching it in universities and churches. The list of books at the back contains the key works to which I have been indebted for so much of the material in this commentary.

I am also grateful to my undergraduate students at the University of Exeter (where I lectured on John 1987–1994) and King's College London (courses on the Gospels from 1994 onward) for their encouragement and ideas, as well as to various postgraduates for their stimulation. Congregations in Exeter University Chapel, King's College Chapel and St Andrew's Church, Whitehall have heard quite a lot of this preached over the years. While I was writing the commentary, I delivered the daily key note Bible Readings on John for the Diocese of Rochester's 'Forward in Mission' conference in October 1997; my thanks to all who participated, especially the Bishop of Rochester and Canon Gordon Oliver.

The Revd Shelagh Brown of the Bible Reading Fellowship invited me to write this and was very encouraging at the beginning; her sudden death in July 1997 left us all the poorer. I am grateful to Naomi Starkey for her editorial assistance and the way she has taken over the project, as well as to my colleagues as Editors, David Winter and Henry Wansbrough as we have now completed the commentaries on the entire Bible over the last decade. Many people have acted as 'trial readers' of these studies while they were being written, but I am particularly grateful to Jane Pendarves and Betty Jeffery for all their time, interest and helpful suggestions.

As always, it has been my wife, Sue, and our daughters, Rebecca and Sarah who have put up with author's stress and preoccupation at the computer. Without their continuing love and understanding, it would not have been possible.

I am grateful to Professor Raymond Brown for the constant inspiration of his writings on John, and for his personal warmth and interest in the first edition of this commentary. Following his sudden death when it was just about to be published, I gladly dedicated this book to his memory.

PBC John: Introduction

'A book in which a child may paddle
but an elephant can swim deep.'

Welcome to all those who cannot wait to get in the water

Whenever we go to the beach, my children rush to take off their shoes and socks and go paddling immediately—and I was the same at their age. So this is a quick word of encouragement and safety warning to those who want to jump straight into the text. John's gospel is a lovely story which can be enjoyed by those who know little of Jesus and nothing of the background, which is why it is often given out at churches and meetings to those who are enquiring about the Christian faith. So, go ahead and splash around in it! You can jump about and dip in here and there, because these little studies are all separate in themselves. On the other hand, you might want to use it for your early morning bathe and exercise, and take one or two sections each day for meditation and prayer. If you have the stamina, you can immerse yourself in reading it straight through, for each part flows into the next.

But, as that little saying above about John notes, it is also a book in which the real heavyweights, the mystics and the theologians, have been drowning for centuries! Beneath that placid surface run powerful undercurrents and eddies which will circle you around and bring you out some way forward or back from where you went in. I have tried to chart some of these as we go along, but if you get into difficulties, you might find it helpful to get out, sit on the beach and read these notes. And of course, if you want to do some serious wallowing in John, a little bit of preparation is always a good idea.

You will need a Bible, New Testament or gospel text open as you read. Each study is on a small section and we shall usually work through it verse by verse. Quotations tend to be from the Revised Standard Version or the New RSV, but often I will paraphrase the meaning of the original Greek. You should be able to follow it with any translation, and try several for variation.

What is this book?

It is called a 'gospel', or *eu-angelion* in Greek which means a 'good message' or 'good news', connected with the word 'angel' or messenger. In the Old Testament this means the 'good news' of God's peace and salvation, brought to poor and hurting people trapped in pain or oppression (Isaiah 52:7; 61:1). In the Graeco-Roman world, it was used for the latest proclamation from the local government or the emperor. But what it is called does not tell us what it is. In its form and content it describes a couple of years of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, a preacher, teacher and wonder-worker in the Roman province of Judaea, concentrating particularly on his trial and execution by the political and religious authorities and the rather strange things which happened afterwards. It is not what we would expect from a biography today.

On the other hand, it is very like many ancient accounts of teachers, philosophers, generals, and statesmen. They tended to be quite short; John is just over 15,000 words, or about a sixth of this book. It was the amount which could fit on a single scroll of papyrus and be read aloud in a couple of hours. Because they were relatively short, such works could not cover all of a person's life. So they would focus on some significant stories from someone's public life in society, including a concentration on their death, to show what they were really like. These books were not meant to be accurate historical reporting, nor were they fiction or legend; they would include stories about the person and the kind of things they said and did, to interpret their significance. So John makes it clear that he has made a similar selection from the 'many other things Jesus did' to show the reader who Jesus is, 'the Christ, the Son of God' (20:30–31; 21:25). Therefore we must expect to find both story and interpretative reflection, history and theology.

This explains why the book is structured in two main sections. The first describes Jesus' ministry, from his baptism and meeting his first followers through his teaching and miracles as some people come to believe and accept him while the opposition of others, particularly the authorities, grows over a couple of years (1:19—10:42). It is sometimes called the 'Book of Signs' because of the way Jesus' miracles are used to show who he is. The second half covers only his last few days, teaching his disciples and his trial, death and resurrection (13:1—20:31), often known as the 'Book of Glory' because John

uses 'glory' to describe what happens to Jesus. From these two parts emerges a clear picture of who Jesus is and what happened to him. Around these sections, the writer has arranged a prologue, like an overture to set out the main themes (1:1–18), an interlude at half-time to help change gear (11:1—12:50) and an epilogue to tie up some loose ends (21).

How was it composed and produced?

This book is called 'the gospel according to John'. It does not say it was written *by* him, but is 'according to' his teaching and interpretation. In fact, even this description is not original, but dates from the second century when the four gospels were collected together and given these titles to distinguish them from one another. Furthermore, John is never mentioned in the text. There is an unnamed disciple described as 'the one Jesus loved' who is present at the last supper, the trial, the cross and the resurrection (see on 13:23; 18:15–17; 19:26–27; 20:2–8 below). In the epilogue, he is claimed as the 'witness' who caused it all to be written but who may have since died (see on 21:24). Since the only possibilities in that chapter are the 'sons of Zebedee and two others' (21:2), he has been traditionally identified as the apostle John, son of Zebedee.

It was quite common in the ancient world for the followers of a great man to write up his ideas and teachings, as Plato did for Socrates. If John had led this particular early church for many years, it might be better to think of him as the 'authority' rather than the 'author' of the gospel 'according to John'. Since we do not know who actually wrote the book, in this commentary we shall use 'John' to refer to the 'writer', 'author' or 'evangelist', and sometimes even to describe the text itself in the traditional manner.

Whoever wrote it seems to have worked independently of the other three gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke are often called the 'Synoptics' because when you 'see' them 'together' (*syn-optic-* in Greek), it is clear that the texts are related, probably with Matthew and Luke using Mark as a source. While John has some of the same people and similar stories, he uses different words and writes in a completely different style with many individuals, events and teachings occurring only in this gospel.

Because of the interlude and the epilogue, and the way the story jumps around between Galilee and Jerusalem, some scholars think

the gospel may have gone through several editions before reaching its final form. Certainly it seems to show the effect of years of theological reflection and teaching. However, the attempts to reconstruct earlier versions vary so much that it is probably impossible. Furthermore, with the one exception of the woman taken in adultery (see on 7:53—8:11 below), all the ancient manuscripts have the gospel in the form we have it today. So we shall take the gospel as we find it and work through it verse by verse.

How does it read?

This gospel is written in a very distinctive style, which seems to have emerged through years of teaching and prayer, meditation and theological reflection. Furthermore, the whole gospel uses this style and vocabulary. Punctuation marks were not put into manuscripts until a thousand years later and sometimes it is difficult to see where they go. Thus it is not clear whether the most famous verse, 'God so loved' (3:16) is spoken by Jesus, or is a comment from the writer; the same difficulty makes it unclear whether 3:31–36 is spoken by John the Baptist or another narrative comment (see on 3:9–36 below).

Style and vocabulary

In fact, we could all probably write in John's style after spending a while immersed in the gospel. It has a limited vocabulary with a number of key words repeated over and over again like look, see, witness, know, believe, have faith, world, glory, abide, remain, hour, send. Other words are in contrasting pairs, light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death, above and below, love and hate, father and son. The sentences tend to be short, but they build on each other in steps and stairs and spirals, connecting and reconnecting. Someone has said these words over and over and over again in prayer and teaching. It is ideally suited, therefore, for use now in contemplation and the little prayers and suggestions at the end of each section in this commentary are designed to help you reflect on the passages and let them soak into you.

Time

Time also seems to behave in a similar way for John. Unlike the other gospels which seem to relate only one season of ministry leading to

a Passover, John has a logical sequence over several years with three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 12:1). But time seems to go round and round, to speed up and slow down. The first half of the gospel occupies at least two years, while the second half is little more than a week. Little references like 'now', 'already', 'recently', 'day' abound. At first, Jesus' 'hour' has 'not yet come' (2:4; 7:30; 8:20), but when it arrives it is both the 'hour of glory' and the Passion (12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). There are 'flash backs' and 'flash forwards' which connect parts of the narrative: for example 7:50 and 19:39 refer back to Nicodemus' visit by night in 3:2, while 11:2 looks forward to Mary's anointing in 12:3. There are even references out beyond the story to the disciples' later reflections (2:22; 7:39; 21:23).

Levels of meaning

Like many in the ancient world, John tends to see the world in different levels, with earthly things reflecting or foreshadowing heavenly realities. This is also true of the way he writes. To go back to our opening analogy, the surface looks very placid, but underneath flow ever deeper currents of meaning. Most of Jesus' conversations begin with natural things like birth (3:3), water (4:7), bread (6:25), sight (9:1), but questions and misunderstandings soon follow. As Jesus takes his questioners deeper, John invites us to look beyond earthly things to spiritual realities, to the 'true' bread or 'true vine'. If we look closely at what is happening, some of the stories and images like the manna in the desert or the figure of the good shepherd and the sheep are being played out in Jesus' life, and eventual death. There is tremendous irony below the surface so that Jesus' talk of 'being lifted up' actually means a cross (3:14; 8:28; 12:32) or the soldiers' mocking someone who really is the 'King of the Jews' (19:1–3, 19–22).

Signs and discourses

While John narrates several of Jesus' miracles, he never calls them this. They are 'signs', which 'reveal his glory' (2:11). People believed in him because of the signs (2:23; 7:31; 10:41). The writer tells us that Jesus did many more of them of which these are only a selection to help us believe in him (20:30–31). Most analyses of the gospel suggest that there are seven signs:

- changing water into wine (2:1–11)
- healing the official's son (4:46–54)
- healing the paralysed man (5:1–15)
- feeding the five thousand (6:1–15)
- walking on the water (6:16–21)
- giving sight to the blind man (9:1–7)
- raising Lazarus from the dead (11:17–44)

In addition, there is the huge catch of fish in the epilogue (21:1–11). In order to include this one but still keep to the perfect number '7', some remove one of the others, like the walking on water because it does not seem particularly to 'sign' anything. Certainly, some of the signs lead naturally into Jesus' debates and discourses which draw out the meaning of the 'sign' and some are linked to the seven 'I am' sayings. Thus the feeding leads to the debate about the 'bread of life' (6:25–59) and the blind man is connected to 'the light of the world' (8:12; 9:5). However, other signs like the water into wine or the official's son do not lead to a discourse, and John never mentions the word 'seven', so perhaps we should be careful about trying to be too clever sometimes!

These notes on John's style and way of writing might help us in our studies ahead. The levels of meaning suggest that we should start by reading each passage as a whole at the surface level, but then be ready to go back over it looking more deeply. Use any connections John makes by word echoes or references to time to see how it all links together and to the rest of the gospel. Meditate upon the words he uses and let the simple style and vocabulary sink into you in prayer as you use each section as a 'sign' to reveal God's glory in Christ.

What was the situation?

Whoever was involved in writing and producing this gospel was very familiar with the multi-faith multi-cultural world of the eastern Mediterranean in the first century. It was a real melting pot because of the Romans' deliberate policy of bringing all the countries and peoples together in one empire of peace and easy communications.

Probably nothing was seen like it again until today's 'global village'. Just like today, lots of ideas and beliefs were circulating and being mixed together and their effect can be seen in the gospel.

The Greek background

The dominant Greek philosophical tradition from Socrates and Plato was essentially dualist, contrasting the real but invisible realm of the intellect, the soul and the gods with our material physical universe. In addition, Stoicism stressed the logical stability and rationality (called *logos* in Greek) behind the cosmic order which made ethical demands on people's lives. Meanwhile, religious cults and sects abounded with stories of divine figures who came from the realm of light above to save us from this dark world, and they often had initiation ceremonies into the 'mystery' or 'secret knowledge' which could set people free. The influence of all this can be clearly seen on this gospel, both in the prologue and in the way John portrays Jesus coming into the world to bring salvation. This need not imply that the writer had ever belonged to or studied any of these groups in particular detail. The ideas saturated the culture, and like any good evangelist, John is trying to present Jesus in a way that people will understand.

The Jewish background

At the same time, he is obviously steeped in the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish beliefs. Many of the stories are set against the background of the great Jewish festivals, such as the Sabbath (5), Passover (6), Tabernacles (7—8), Hanukkah (10), and Passover again (13—20), and draw their themes from the rituals and beliefs at each feast. Many of the events take place in and around the temple in Jerusalem. The debates between Jesus and his opponents are conducted according to Jewish customs about witnesses and evidence (see on 5:30–47 below) and great heroes like Moses and Abraham are brought in. The themes of the law, the prophets and the scriptures run constantly just below the surface, and particular quotations and prophecies are used through the Passion (see on 12:15; 19:24, 28, 36). Furthermore, modern study of other groups like the Essenes and the Qumran community near the Dead Sea and of the development of the rabbinic traditions has all shown many links with the ideas and beliefs described in this gospel.

This Jewish background is not surprising. After all, with the exception of a few Samaritans, Greeks and Romans like Pilate (4:7, 39; 12:20; 18:28) everyone in the gospel is Jewish—Jesus, the disciples, the crowds, the leaders, the priests. Jesus is explicitly called 'a Jew' and he says that salvation is 'from the Jews' (4:9, 22). John uses the phrase "the Jews" nearly 70 times, in contrast to only a few mentions in the other gospels. So it is quite a shock to discover that it often describes Jesus' opponents, particularly among the religious leaders (see on 1:19 below)—so we shall denote this with inverted commas. People are frightened of "the Jews" in case they are put 'out of the synagogue', *aposynagogos*, (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). While people could be punished by being barred from the synagogue for a week, or a month, or even totally excommunicated in the Old Testament (see Ezra 10:8), this does not seem to have happened to Jesus and his disciples who went to synagogue as good Jews regularly in the gospels and Acts. Of course, there was opposition and conflict (Luke 6:22), but this technical term, *aposynagogos*, seems to belong to a later period.

After the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in AD70, the surviving rabbis regrouped Judaism around the synagogue and study of the Torah. A prayer called 'the blessing against the heretics' was put into the synagogue liturgy, probably at the Council of Yavneh in AD85, asking that the '*nosrim* and the heretics perish quickly'. If the *nosrim* mean 'Nazarenes' this would make it very difficult for Jewish Christians to attend synagogue and pray against themselves. Regrettably, the split between the early churches and the synagogues developed rapidly after this.

Thus it is possible that John's gospel is being written in the late first century after the War in the period leading to the Council of Yavneh, or even after it, and John's use of the phrases "the Jews" and *aposynagogos* reflects that unhappy time. Perhaps he is aware that some of his readers may have suffered the traumatic experience of excommunication. So he relates their current painful situation to the conflict and opposition from the leaders in Jesus' own day. This is important to remember as it shows John's careful attempt to make his story of Jesus relevant to the people he was writing for. It does not give any justification for the anti-Jewish way the gospel has sometimes been used in later centuries, particularly most recently by the Nazis (see on 8:44 below).

So John is probably writing for a mixed group of people, reflecting the multi-cultural situation of that period. They would know something of Greek philosophy and near eastern religious cults, as well as recognize the allusions to Jewish beliefs and practices. Some might be converts from Hellenistic religions or Jews who have found their faith fulfilled in Jesus as Messiah.

John the Baptist

Another possible group would be followers of John the Baptist. The Jewish historian, Josephus, refers to the Baptist's ministry of preaching and baptizing people. Some people may have been baptized while on pilgrimage or visiting Jerusalem and then taken their new faith back to the cities of Asia Minor or Greece. Thus Paul finds disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus (Acts 19:5). John shows that some of Jesus' early followers had also been disciples of the Baptist (1:35–37). Whenever John the Baptist appears in this gospel, he directs people to Jesus. It is made clear that he is 'not the light' himself, but a witness 'to the light' (1:8). His 'witness' is then repeated and expanded (see on 1:24–34). He does not even mind when his followers complain that Jesus is baptizing more people, saying 'He must increase and I must decrease' (3:30). Some scholars have interpreted this material as an 'attack' on the Baptist, seeing it as an attempt to persuade his followers to join the new Christian church. Certainly, John is keen to encourage everyone to find life though faith in Jesus as Christ, but this need not imply a particular attack on any one, especially not the Baptist. Later Jesus pays him the compliment of 'bearing witness to the truth' as 'a burning and shining lamp' (5:33–35).

Peter and the beloved disciple

If the 'disciple Jesus loved' is the 'authority' behind the gospel, it is interesting to consider his relationship with Peter. They always seem to appear together and the beloved disciple usually goes one better than Peter. Thus he is next to Jesus at the supper and asks Peter's question for him; he gets Peter into the high priest's courtyard; he is at the foot of the cross when Peter is nowhere to be seen; he beats Peter to the empty tomb and is the first to believe; he tells Peter that the stranger on the lakeside is the risen Jesus, and he will live long when Peter is martyred (13:23–25; 18:15–17; 19:26–27; 20:2–8; 21:7, 22). Some scholars read this as a game of 'anything you can do,

we can do better'; so they argue that John is promoting his church and attacking the churches linked with Peter.

On the other hand, there is a lot of positive material about Peter: Simon is one of the first to follow Jesus and is renamed 'Peter', the 'rock', by him; he is the one who makes the confession of faith when others are leaving; he wants to be washed all over by Jesus; he tries to defend Jesus; there is no cursing, swearing oaths or bitter weeping at his denial; the beloved disciple waits to give him the honour of being first into the tomb and the first to meet Jesus at the lakeside; finally he is restored by the Good Shepherd to the pastoral care of his flock (1:42; 6:68; 13:9; 18:10, 27; 20:6; 21:7, 15–17). This is all too much for an 'attack' on him. Peter is just another human being who tries to follow Jesus, who sometimes gets it wonderfully right and other times horribly wrong—but he is forgiven and restored by Jesus, so there is hope for us also. The anonymity of the beloved disciple makes him almost an 'ideal figure'—and we are all encouraged to fill in the blank with our own face and name and become a 'disciple Jesus loved'.

John and other early Christian groups

In recent decades, it has been fashionable to reconstruct the 'community of the beloved disciple', the church within which and for which the gospel was written. Some have even read the gospel as a kind of symbolic history of John's community, taking Jesus' encounters with people as allegories of the church being started from disciples of the Baptist and some Jerusalem Jews with missions to the Samaritans and the Greeks leading to its eventual expulsion from the synagogue. All of these people may well have been found in the communities which read John's gospel. However, if he had wanted to write recent church history for them, it would have been easier to do it like the Book of Acts. The variety of reconstructions and the lack of any external evidence has meant that such approaches are less common now. There is clearly a long process of prayer and reflection behind the gospel over many years, but all we have is the finished text.

Others have tried to relate the gospel to the epistles of John and the book of Revelation, calling them all 'Johannine' books. The epistles are certainly written in a similar style and share John's vocabulary. They are also involved in a situation of splits and conflicts, especially

against early Docetic heretics, so called because they thought Jesus only seemed (*docein* in Greek) to be human (1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 1:7). This fits in with John's stress that the 'Word became flesh' (1:14). Revelation has many similarities to this gospel, but also differences of style, vocabulary and content.

Without any further evidence it is difficult to be sure about all of this and going much further into these complex issues would take us away from our task here of studying the gospel. What this brief survey has shown is how John does not write in a vacuum. Like all those who wrote ancient biographies, he is trying to tell people about his subject, Jesus, and to interpret him afresh for their situation. As we study his gospel today we can have no better aim.

What does it teach?

John is not just a beautiful writer who is clever enough to fit his message to the situation facing his initial readers, but he is also the sublime theologian of the early church. Debates raged about the meaning of his apparently simple words as ever deeper levels were explored. He was used by all sides in the various controversies over the formation of the creeds during the next few centuries and he was loved by groups in the mainstream, at the fringes and way outside what came to be seen as orthodox Christianity. Equally, over the last two millennia and all around the world he has provoked an extraordinary output of homilies, sermons, statements, books, lectures, courses, papers, essays, dissertations, and so forth. Here we can only sketch out briefly a few key aspects of his theology.

Christology

John is clear at the end of the gospel that his purpose is that we might believe that 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (20:31). He has perhaps the highest Christology, or understanding of Jesus, in the whole of the New Testament. At the same time, we must be careful about reading the arguments of later debates back into his text. John stresses that we see the 'glory of God' in the 'Word become flesh' against the philosophical and religious background of his own day; but the later arguments about the nature of Jesus and the Trinity were based on a much more complex philosophy. These debates were really about *ontology*, the nature of 'being' within the Godhead and *how* Jesus could 'be' both human and divine. John just asserts that

he *is*; he is more concerned for *function*—what Jesus said and *did* then, and still does now, for human beings. It is no accident that John's style is a lot more full of verbs and 'doing' things than 'static' nouns of 'being'.

As we shall see in the prologue, he draws upon the rich philosophical tradition of the 'Word', *logos*, behind the cosmos to explain who Jesus really is as that Word becomes flesh and dwells among us (1:14). He also uses the Jewish tradition about the Word of God, which he combines with the figure of God's Wisdom, who was with him at the creation and comes among men and women to teach them the way of God (Prov. 8:22–31).

He uses a number of *titles* to describe Jesus. The gospel opens with debate about who the Christ might be (1:20); John the Baptist says that it is not him. Soon Jesus is called 'Christ' by the first disciples, some Samaritans and other believers (1:41; 4:25, 29; 11:27). 'Christ' is the Greek form of the Hebrew 'Messiah' and both words mean God's 'anointed one'. In the Hebrew scriptures priests, kings and prophets were all anointed as a sign of God's special task for them. Later there emerged a longing for someone who would be *the* Messiah, God's anointed person to bring in his kingdom. When Jesus enters Jerusalem to be hailed as 'king' (12:13) the authorities are worried and he is executed as 'king of the Jews' which is also a messianic claim. John makes it clear that Jesus lived and died as the 'Christ'.

However, John's reason for writing connects 'Christ' with 'Son of God' (20:31). God is called Father over 100 times and Jesus is identified as the 'Son' about fifty, so John is making a clear statement about his relationship to God. The name of God was linked in the Old Testament with ultimate Being, 'I am who I am' (Exod. 3:14). In John's gospel, Jesus makes seven 'I am' statements, claiming to be the bread of life, the light of the world, the door to the sheepfold, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, truth and life, and the true vine (6:35, 41, 51; 8:12, 9:5; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Not only do these hint at the divine name, 'I am', but the descriptions are all central images of the Jewish faith and Law being now fulfilled in Jesus.

John also depicts Jesus being aware of his unique relationship with God, knowing that he was pre-existent with God and is going to return to him in glory. He is the source of all life and all judgment is

committed to him (3:16–21; 5:19–29). The Father inspires and indwells all he says and does so much that to see him is to have seen the Father, for 'the Father and I are one' (14:9–10; 10:30). At the same time, 'the Word became flesh' (1:14), so John shows Jesus' humanity: he gets tired and thirsty in Samaria, he weeps at his friend's grave, he is tempted to shrink back from being crucified, and on the cross he is thirsty and really dies a human death (4:6–7; 11:33–38; 12:27; 19:28, 34).

This is indeed a highly developed Christology and shows how much John has thought and reflected on the meaning of Jesus over many years. And yet, it is only the logical outworking of the picture of Jesus in the other gospels who taught us to call God *Abba*, our Father, and who was bringing in the Kingdom of God through his parables and miracles. At the same time, John's understanding of Jesus was to set the tracks on a course which would lead to the later debates and creeds.

Eschatology

We have already noted John's interest in time. The Hebrew prophets looked forward to the 'last day', the 'day of the Lord' when God's justice would finally be revealed at the end of time. The Greek word for 'end' is *eschaton*, so the study of things to do with 'the End' is called 'eschatology'. In the other gospels, Jesus says that the End, the 'kingdom of God', when God's kingship will be recognized by everyone, was breaking into our time here and now through his teaching and miracles (Lk. 11:20). However, they also each contain long sections of Jesus' teaching about the End when he will come again on the clouds of glory to judge everyone (Mk. 13:3–37; Matt. 24—25; Lk. 21:5–36).

John does not have anything quite like these blocks of teaching about the coming of the End. Instead, Jesus talks as though his coming into the world has brought the End here already. So, although God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save it, the coming of light into darkness inevitably creates shadows; the arrival of Jesus has brought about the judgment, the 'critical moment' when some people reject the light and prefer to remain in the shadows (3:16–21). So we say that John sees eschatology as 'realized', made real in the present in our decision here and now. As people accept and believe in Jesus so they come into eternal life now, so much that

Lazarus can even be raised from the dead now without having to wait for the end of time (see on 11:17–44 below).

On the other hand, Jesus still talks of 'the last day' (e.g. 6:39–40; 12:48). While all the benefits of eternal life and knowing God can be received as we accept Jesus, there is still inevitably a future dimension to judgment. Perhaps the best section about John's understanding of eschatology is 5:19–29. Here Jesus says that all judgment and authority to give life has been granted to him by God the Father. In 5:19–24 this seems to be happening now in the present, while in 5:25–29 it is all repeated in the future tense. The two sections are linked by 'the hour is coming, and now is' (5:25). This is the heart of what John is trying to say: 'the hour is coming' when there will be judgment and eternal life, but it 'now is' available to us in Jesus, here, already.

Church and Sacraments

Perhaps no topic so divides scholars as John's understanding of the church and the sacraments. On the one hand, scholars of a more Protestant background point out that there is very little about this in the text of the gospel. In reply, those from a more Catholic tradition see images of the church and sacraments all over the gospel. In part, this situation arises from John's habit of writing on several levels at once; two commentators can look at the same passage and see different things depending on how deep they look.

On the surface level, the first group are quite right to point out that none of the key words about the church are ever used in John; there is little emphasis on the twelve apostles, but lots of stories about various people, most of whom are never heard of again—the Samaritan woman, the woman taken in adultery, the blind man and so on. It is all very individualistic, with individuals coming to Jesus, but not through the church or the community of faith.

In response, the other group look more deeply at Jesus' great images of the shepherd and the sheep, or the vine and the branches and notice how corporate these are. Part of the problem is that English does not distinguish between 'you-singular' (the old 'thee' and 'thou') and 'you-plural'; it is thus very easy to take all the wonderful promises of Jesus at the Last Supper in an individualistic way as addressed to each believer personally. However, closer inspection of the Greek reveals that these are all 'you-plurals'; we experience the promises of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit all together as the

community of believers. We shall try to point out these 'you-plurals' in these studies. Furthermore, it is John's gospel where Jesus gives us the example of washing each other's feet and the 'new commandment' to 'love one another as I have loved you'. The mark of the church by which people will know we are his disciples is if we love one another (13:1–11, 34–35; 15:12–13). It is hard to have a higher understanding of the church than that!

Unfortunately, mention of the last supper causes the more Protestant scholars to jump up again. They note that it is very curious that there is no institution of the holy communion at the last supper, just the foot washing (13:1–11). What is more, there is no account of Jesus actually being baptized either, but it is just passed over briefly in a mention by John the Baptist (1:32–33). There is no command to baptize or to 'do this in remembrance of me' for the communion. Instead, there is a great stress on the Word, and on Jesus' teaching; we should get rid of our altars and fonts and build bigger pulpits!

The sacramentalists have to admit that the omission of the communion and baptism is rather embarrassing, on the face of it at least. But, if we look below the surface, suddenly we are awash with sacramental references. Water is in nearly every chapter at the start, from the Baptist, to water into wine, to being born of water and the Spirit, to living water, to healing by water, to streams of living water, and so on through to Jesus washing the disciples' feet (1:26–33; 2:1–11; 3:5; 4:10–15; 5:1–9; 7:38; 9:7; 13:1–11). Equally, water is turned into vast quantities of wine, Jesus calls himself the 'true vine' and there is lots of bread around, even at the last supper (2:1–11; 15:1; 6:1–14, 31–35; 13:26–30). The feeding of the five thousand looks like an open-air communion and it is difficult to interpret the debate about eating his flesh and drinking his blood as anything other than the eucharist (6:1–14, 50–58).

This is an excellent example of how the way we read John's style and manner of writing can affect our view of his theology, particularly with regard to the deeper levels of meaning. Are these things really there below the surface, or are they merely reflections of our own views? We will point out the main passages for the debate as we go through the gospel and you will have to think about it and ask the Holy Spirit to help you decide.

Clement of Alexandria said towards the end of the second century that John was a 'spiritual gospel' written later to supplement the 'physical facts' described in the other three gospels (according to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI:14:7). This came to represent how John was viewed up to this century—that John knew the Synoptics and wrote later to provide spiritual reflection upon their historical accounts.

The development of modern scholarship and literary criticism tended to confirm this approach to John. For most of this century, scholars thought that John was written at the end of the first century, or even into the early part of the second; his philosophical awareness seemed very Greek and to have lost touch with the Jewish background of Jesus and the early disciples; everything was seen to have a theological purpose or spiritual meaning and none of his events or conversations were thought to have any basis in history. The only possible historical material John had would have come from the Synoptic gospels. One example of such an approach is that the five porticoes at the pool of Bethesda were interpreted from St Augustine onwards as symbolizing the five books of the Law of Moses—identifying the sick but not able to heal them; then Jesus does what the old Law could not and makes the man whole (5:1–9). Obviously, in this view, the porches had no historical existence; Jerusalem was destroyed a generation or more before the gospel was thought to have been written so neither the writer nor the first readers would have known anything about what it had looked like.

Over recent decades, however, this approach has been seriously challenged. First, most scholars now consider that John was written independently of the other gospels, and they are therefore no longer the yardstick by which he is to be judged. Certainly he shares some old material with them which was passed on through the oral tradition which may or may not have an historical basis; each must be assessed on its own merits. Furthermore, we have become more aware of the amount of theological interpretation in the other gospels which makes them more like John. Like other ancient biographies, all the gospels set out to explain and interpret their subject and his significance.

While the Synoptic gospels are now seen as more theological, conversely John has been shown to be more historical. Research on the

Dead Sea Scrolls and on the beliefs of the Essenes and other Jewish groups of the early first century has revealed lots of ideas and thoughts which are quite similar to John's approach. These groups were all destroyed in the Jewish War of 66–70 and their beliefs were lost. Without them, John's ideas used to look quite late and Greek. Now we know that they were not so different from other earlier, Jewish writings. Similarly, developments in archaeology in Israel and Palestine over recent decades have revealed a lot more about Jerusalem and Judaea before the Jewish War—and John's awareness of places and geography now seems quite good. Even the Pool of Bethesda has been excavated and we can now walk among its five porticoes! Of course, this cannot prove the historicity or otherwise of any miracle or conversation Jesus or anyone else may have held there—but it does caution us against assuming that everything is only symbolic and theological.

This all means that the process by which John's gospel came to be written is a lot more complex. Both the previous extreme views are too simplistic. John's awareness of Greek philosophy and the painful separation of the early churches from the synagogues in the latter part of the first century means that this gospel is not meant to be a straightforward eye-witness accurate record of what a Galilean fisherman heard and saw Jesus say and do. On the other hand, his knowledge of early Aramaic terms like 'Messiah' or 'Cephas' for Peter (1:41–42), his use of ideas common to Jewish groups wiped out—and awareness of places destroyed—in the Jewish War of 66–70 suggests that the gospel contains a good historical foundation dating back to the first half of the century. If the 'witness' behind the gospel, identified as 'the disciple Jesus loved', was John son of Zebedee some of it will have come from him. It is not just a later Greek symbolic invention.

As Pilate says in John, 'What is truth?' (18:38). To us today, truth is about tape-recordings of what an American President might or might not have said—and even then the truth is hard to discover! On the other hand, we consider 'myth' to be '*un*true', a fairy story. The people of Jesus' and John's day, however, had very different ideas and we must not impose our concepts of truth on to first-century texts like the gospels. To the ancients, 'myth' was the medium whereby profound truth, more truly true than mere tape-recorded facts could ever be, was communicated—hence John's use of the words 'true'

and ‘truly’ nearly fifty times. John’s gospel has an underlying basic level of historical information about the sorts of things Jesus said and did and the places where they happened, leading up to his trial and death. Over that are laid levels of awareness of the complex melting pot of the first century, including Jewish beliefs from before the destruction of Jerusalem and Graeco-Roman religious and philosophical systems. In writing his brief account of Jesus, he is trying to get from one level to the other. He has prayed and reflected on ‘the many other things Jesus did’ and makes a selection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to ‘bear true witness’ in the situation of his first readers about the *truth* of who Jesus *truly* is and *really* means for them—‘so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (20:30–31; 21:24–25).

The kids are splashing about and the elephants are enjoying wallowing; the children of God are enjoying new life in Christ and the theologians are plumbing ever greater depths. Breakfast on the beach is over and it is time for us to immerse ourselves in John’s living waters. Enjoy it!

Richard A. Burridge

1 JOHN 1:1–2

IN *the* BEGINNING

The opening of John's gospel is one of the most magnificent pieces of religious literature ever written. Not surprisingly, it has inspired vast amounts of analysis and interpretation. And yet, we are not even sure quite what it is: is it an introduction, a hymn or a poem? Arguments rage over whether it extends from verse 1 to verse 14 or to verse 18, whether or not the passages about John the Baptist belong here (1:6–8, 15), and how its structure might be analysed.

It is usually called 'the Prologue', although it is more like an overture, for it introduces some key themes and particular words which the writer will use over and over in the gospel. On the other hand, some of its ideas and phrases never appear again, including the central idea of 'the Word'. Therefore scholars have wondered whether it was written by the same author as the rest. Some suggest that it may have been an early hymn, which already existed and which the evangelist adapted for his purposes. Others think that it was composed later, and added to the already completed gospel. Indeed, I wrote the rest of this commentary first and came to the Prologue last!

So, read it now as the introduction to the gospel and these studies. It will give you a flavour of the great journey we are about to undertake and you will hear some of the major themes. Don't worry if some ideas are difficult or the motifs too grand at this stage. Come back and study it again after you have finished the whole gospel—and see how all the things you have learned and friends you have made are hinted at here.

Begin at the beginning

So we begin, as John does, at the beginning. Mark starts his gospel with Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist; Matthew begins with Jesus' birth, while Luke takes us back to the birth of John the Baptist as the one who prepared his way. John is traditionally symbolized by an eagle, and he certainly takes the high-flying perspective here! Jesus cannot be introduced in terms of time, place and human ancestry: he existed 'in the beginning' (1:1). This phrase would remind his readers immediately of the opening words of the Hebrew scriptures, 'in the beginning' (Gen. 1:1). Indeed, while *genesis* is the Greek word for

‘beginning’ or ‘origin’, the Jews called the first book of the Bible by its opening Hebrew words ‘in the beginning’. Yet John goes even further, for Genesis starts with the creation of everything *at* the beginning; John takes us back *before* then, when only God existed.

The Word

John does not actually name Jesus until the end of the prologue (1:17). Instead, he calls him ‘the Word’. The Jews thought that God’s word was alive and active (Is. 55:11) from the creation, when God had only to say, ‘Let there be…’ for things to come into being (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, etc.), to God’s word coming through all the prophets. In Greek philosophy from early thinkers like Heraclitus to the Stoics, who were also popular among the Romans, the ‘word’, *logos*, was used for the logical rationality behind the universe. In later Jewish beliefs, this masculine principle was complemented by the feminine figure of Lady Wisdom, who was present with God at the creation (Prov. 8:22–31). This idea was developed in the writings between the times of the Testaments, as can be seen in the book of Wisdom in the Apocrypha (Wis. 7:22—10:21). There was further speculation in Jewish mysticism about the role of both wisdom and the Law with God.

But it is John who pulls all these threads together with the amazing idea that the Word was not only pre-existent with God but also personal. In 1:1–2 he states that ‘the Word was with (the) God’, including the definite article ‘the’ to stress how the Word existed with the creator Father God of Jewish monotheism—for there is no other god. Furthermore, ‘the Word was God’ without any article. He does not say ‘the Word was *a* god’, with the indefinite article, implying that Jesus was some sort of lesser divinity, as some groups believe who have split away from orthodox Christianity both in the past and today. Nor does he say ‘the Word was *the* God’, for that would imply that Jesus was all there is to God. No, he carefully writes ‘the Word was God’, divine, personal, existing in the unity of the Godhead and yet somehow distinct—for ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (1:14). That is the wonderful story which John is setting out to tell us.

PRAYER

God our Father, inspire our study of these written words
that we may know your living Word, Jesus Christ.

2 JOHN 1:3–8

LIGHT *in the* DARKNESS

Greek philosophy and many eastern religions had an essential 'dualism', a separation between the material world and the spiritual realm. God exists in brilliant light in the world above, while we live in the darkness of created matter. Therefore God can have nothing to do with the physical level. At best, this material universe is but a pale shadow of divine reality; however, many saw our world as positively evil, containing nothing good. Human beings were seen in a similar dualistic fashion: the physical body is sinful flesh or meaningless matter, inhabited by the soul which pre-existed in the divine light and strives to return there. Thus ancient philosophy from Socrates and Plato onwards sought 'enlightenment' or 'knowledge' to set the soul free into the bright intellectual realms, while many eastern religions offered 'salvation', often through 'initiation' into mysteries to enable the soul to leave the body after death and ascend back to the divine.

As a child of his time, John shares some of this. Thus he depicts the Word pre-existing with God in light, but descending into our dark world to bring salvation, before returning to the Father. John uses the separation of the divine 'above' and the world 'below' frequently, so the overture has introduced his first theme. However, he has also been nourished in the Jewish tradition that the world is the good creation of a loving God: 'the earth is the Lord's and all it contains' (Ps. 24). Thus he affirms the world's goodness and the Word's involvement in creation in a way abhorrent to a thoroughgoing dualist.

Life and light

First he asserts that 'all things came into being' through the Word and nothing exists without him (1:3). At a stroke, John inspires the great Christian involvement in the arts *and* the sciences. Scientific enquiry is possible if the world is not some malicious fantasy but the result of a creator's love—to study the laws of physics is to search out the mind of God, as many great scientists like Kepler and Newton believed. Equally, rather than trying to escape the material body, our humanity can be explored in sculpture and paint, poetry and prose, dance and drama, music and song—because 'in him was life' (1:4).

Suddenly two great fanfares burst out of John's overture to

announce the major themes of light and life, two words which he uses twice as often as the other gospels. Here all 'life' is found in the Word and he balances this neatly at the end with his purpose in writing that we 'might have life in his name' (20:31). Because 'God so loved the world', he gave his Son so we 'should not perish but have eternal life' (3:16). His life is also 'the light of all people' (1:4). The presence of the Word is the 'light come into the darkness' (3:19) and John uses light and darkness as a contrasting pair throughout, together with the images of night and day. Now, 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot master it' (1:5). The English 'master' reflects the double meaning of the Greek, both to 'understand' or 'comprehend' and to 'overcome' or 'extinguish'. The coming of light into darkness inevitably creates shadows, so there will be conflict and judgment.

A witness to the light

Next, John introduces two more themes—'sending' and 'witness'. John the Baptist was 'sent from God' (1:6). Unlike the dualist God who has no contact with the world, John stresses that the nature of God is to 'send'. He uses the verb 'send' about sixty times, nearly twice as frequently as the other gospels—and God does most of the sending. First he sends John the Baptist, and then Jesus. Finally, Jesus sends us into the world, 'as the Father sent me' (20:21).

John is sent as a 'witness to the light' (1:7). The Greek word for witness, *martur-*, gives us the English 'martyr' for a witness even to death. John uses the noun and its verb 'to bear witness' or 'to testify' more than the other three gospels put together, so it is another key idea. It recurs throughout as Jesus is constantly put on trial and asked for 'witnesses' for his claims, and with another careful balance the gospel ends with the witness of the writer himself (21:24). John the Baptist had many devoted followers, but the evangelist stresses that 'he himself was not the light', but came as a 'witness to the light' (1:8). The relationship of John the Baptist and Jesus will be explored in the first few chapters; for now, the writer states simply that John came to witness to the light 'so that all might believe through him', introducing another important theme—'believe'—into this overture.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, shine your light into my life,
that I may be a witness for you.

3 JOHN 1:9–13

ACCEPTANCE *or* REJECTION?

The overture is now in full swing, moving from its magnificent opening about the Word with God in the beginning to what happens when the Word enters into the world. This introduces many of the gospel's key themes. As God 'sends' the 'light' into the 'darkness' to bring 'life', some 'believe' and 'witness'. Unfortunately, this is not the only reaction possible and the gospel's main story is about the acceptance or rejection of the Word which the overture now introduces.

First, John distinguishes the Word as 'the true light' (1:9) from John the Baptist, whom many thought was the light, while actually he was only a reflection or witness to it (1:7–8). Another key motif, the words 'true' and 'truth' feature nearly fifty times in this gospel, three times the total in the others. Here too, John turns the dualists' ideas around; Greek philosophy stressed how true reality was only in the realm above, and everything in our world merely pale shadows and reflections. So for John, Jesus is 'the truth', foreshadowed by Jewish festivals, beliefs and ideas about the Law. But while dualists thought we had to leave this world to find truth, John announces that the 'true bread' and the 'true vine' has come to find us (14:6; 6:32; 15:1).

The Hebrew prophets looked forward to God's light coming in glory (Is. 9:2; 42:6; 60:1). That light, says John, is personal, as he breaks grammar from the neuter 'light' to the personal pronoun 'he', and available, 'coming into the world'. We do not leave the world to find enlightenment; he 'enlightens everyone'. The scale of John's insight is staggering: what is true and good in all philosophies and religions, thought and culture, arts and science—all of it comes from the enlightenment of the Word.

The world

John's stupendous claim, which no dualist would dare contemplate, is that the divine Word, the true light, has come 'into the world' (1:9). To them 'the world' was negative and evil. John is more subtle: he uses 'the world' nearly eighty times, over five times as often as in the Synoptics. Sometimes it is simply neutral, meaning 'the earth' or 'everyone', like the French *tout le monde* (e.g. 12:19). Essentially the world is positive, the good creation of the loving God, which he sent

his Son to save (3:16). On the other hand, when the world rejects Jesus, it becomes negative, the source of opposition, especially later in the gospel (see on 15:18–19 below). All three usages are here: 'he was in the world (neutral), and the world was made through him (positive), yet the world did not know him (negative)' (1:10).

His own

The dualists thought that 'knowledge' was a way out of the world. Some who split away from Christianity were called 'Gnostics' from their stress on 'knowledge', *gnosis*, to get us back to the divine realms. 'Knowledge' and 'knowing' are used by John over 140 times—but it is often Jesus' knowledge of everything (e.g. 13:3; 18:4). Eternal life is 'to know God and Jesus Christ whom he sent' (17:3) and such knowledge comes through 'believing', which occurs nearly one hundred times, three times its usage in the Synoptics. The Word, the true light, came into the world 'to his own', a neuter phrase for his own possession, realm, or home. While 'the whole world' belongs to God, Israel was his 'special possession' (Exod. 19:5) and the Jews 'his people' (Deut. 7:6; 14:2). But John moves from the neuter to the personal pronoun to say that 'his own people did not accept him'. So 1:11 is a summary of the first half of this gospel, as Jesus comes to his own people but many, especially the religious leaders, reject him.

But alongside that theme of rejection, the overture plays the counterpoint of 'all who received him, who believed in his name'. Thus 1:12 is the summary of the second half of the gospel. Although 'his own people' do not accept him, Jesus calls together a group who 'know' that he was sent by God and who 'believe in him'. These become 'his own sheep' who 'know his voice'; at the last supper, he gathers together 'his own in the world' and loves them 'to the end' (10:4, 14; 13:1). To these he gives 'the authority to become children of God', who are born not by natural means, but a spiritual re-birth 'of God' (1:13). As the gospel unfolds, watch for people like Nicodemus, coming out of darkness to believe in Jesus, and to become 'his own', born of the Spirit (3:1–8).

PRAYER

Light of the world,
help me to know and believe in you
and make me a child of God.

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