

Jesus's Wisdom in the Gospel of John

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The gospel of John is unique among the four gospels. Both Matthew and Luke use Mark's gospel as a foundation and add other material. It is thought that Mark was the first to be written and circulated, likely before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Matthew and Luke followed a bit later in the first century after Mark (in some form) was already in circulation. John's gospel comes from a very different perspective. In the other gospels Jesus is only gradually revealed in his words and deeds as the Messiah. John's gospel announces this from the beginning. There is no birth or infancy narrative; instead there is a first Chapter that proclaims Jesus as the incarnate Word of God. Many stories are included that are absent in the other (synoptic) gospels, and much of what is in the those others is not in John. In the synoptics, much of Jesus's teaching is in parables. In John, Jesus uses discourse (primarily with his disciples).

The Gospel of John does not explicitly identify its author, except as "the beloved disciple." (See John 21:24-25.) There is close association in writing style and theology with the three epistles of John and the Revelation (the latter credited to "John the Elder"). All are traditionally credited to the apostle John, who by the time the Gospel was written, would have been of venerable age. There are some traditions that the apostle John was martyred early. So, we can't know with 100% assurance that all of the words of these writings came from the disciple John, but surely they came from someone very close to Jesus. Perhaps they were transmitted orally before being committed to writing, as we saw likely the case for Mark. Having acknowledged this bit of uncertainty, I'm going to call the author "John". (It's a good name!) Keep in mind that the very earliest manuscripts of the Christian New Testament writings date only back to around 400 A.D. Writings from earlier dates are just fragments, of which the earliest are about the second century.

At the time John's gospel was edited into the form we have, the Church faced somewhat different circumstances than it did in Paul's day. There was change even from the time when Luke and Matthew wrote. Jerusalem had been destroyed, and with it the Jerusalem church. The Sadducees (who ran the temple) were gone. Judaism was in crisis, and ultimately consolidated around the views of the Pharisees. In 90 A.D. at the Council of Jamnia, Jewish religious authorities declared a canon of scriptures (the Jewish Bible), and also declared that Christians could not be Jews. Throughout the Roman world, the Jews separated Christians out, and told the Roman authorities, "They are not us." The Romans had given

Jews permission not to have to declare “Caesar is Lord.” Everybody else was expected to adopt the Emperor into their pantheon of gods, to be worshiped along with Zeus, Dianna, Isis, and whoever else. So, when Christians also refused to say, “Caesar is Lord,” they no longer had cover as being a type of Judaism. This was the beginning of widespread persecution. The early Church was beginning to come under attack, sometimes quite harshly, from both Roman authorities and from Jewish authorities.

The Church had also changed from Paul’s day, where inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles was common, to a more predominantly Gentile church. One factor was the deliberate separation by the Jews mentioned above. Also, most new converts were Gentiles, as the Church grew within the Greco-Roman world. That meant that many new Christians did not have familiarity with the Jewish scriptures. They did have some access to the Septuagint, the Jewish Bible translated into Greek. In that day before printing, any sort of written documents were rare and precious. Such Bibles were uncommon. It is not surprising that a number of heresies developed that essentially rejected the Jewish perspective entirely. They imagined Jesus as something devoid of humanity, entirely spirit.

These ideas were called “Gnosticism”, taken from the Greek word “gnosis” for “knowledge.” Notice the difference – gnosis (knowledge) versus Sophia (wisdom). The idea was that the path to salvation was the acquisition of secret knowledge. There were at the also various non-Christian gnostic cults as well, sometimes called “mystery religions” – the cult of Mithras, for example. The point is, in Gnosticism salvation is achieved by human effort – acquiring knowledge, not by God’s love and grace. Given the times, it’s no surprise that Gnosticism appeared within early Christianity. A particularly problematic variation is called “Docetism.” That’s derived from the word “docent”. Even in our day, the word docent is used for someone who portrays a person from an earlier era, typically as part of a historical exhibit. If you visit Williamsburg or other historical sites, or even a renaissance fair, you will find ladies or men dressed up as if of that earlier era, pretending to be a historical figure. The idea in Docetism is that Jesus wasn’t really human. He just “seemed” to be human. Jesus didn’t really die on that cross. The divine spirit was removed, and it just seemed that way. John’s gospel and John’s later writings are particularly written with the idea of countering Gnosticism and Docetism. There is an emphasis on God’s love and love for others as a distinguishing sign between true Christianity and the self-elevating doctrines of the Gnostic heresies.

In spite of John's defense of orthodox Christianity against the Gnostics, he uses language that would have felt familiar in the Greek world. Hebrew is very physical and down to earth. Greek favors abstraction, philosophical constructs, and concepts. We get that flavor in John's gospel. The question and answer type of discourse would have seemed familiar to the Gentile converts. We see numerous examples of this in John. An example: Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, affirming that Jesus must come from God. Jesus makes a statement, "... no one can see the kingdom of God without being born [again] from above [in NRSV]. Nicodemus questions that, "Re-enter the womb and born again?" Jesus talks about being born of the Spirit, and the wind (the same word in Hebrew). Nicodemus asks "How can these things be?" Jesus then teaches in a discourse that culminates in that beloved and singularly important verse, John 3:16:

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Similarly, in today's scripture, Jesus is teaching, and comforting, his disciples in his "Farewell Discourse." The structure is similar to that with Nicodemus. Jesus makes a statement – he is going to prepare the way and his disciples know the way to follow. Thomas asks, "How can we know the way?" Jesus answers. Then Philip makes his statement that shows he does not comprehend. (Who would?) Jesus then addresses that implied question. **"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. ..."** This discourse continues through Chapters 14, to 16, followed by a lengthy prayer in Chapter 17. These are Jesus's last words of wisdom to his disciples, to prepare them for what is to come. They will not come to understand those events until after the Resurrection. Even then, it took considerable time.

Each of the gospels makes a different contribution to our understanding of Jesus and what God has done through His ministry, His sacrificial death, and His Resurrection. The author of John seems to have been particularly close to Jesus, in a different way that Peter was. When he wrote (or passed on) what we have in this gospel, he would have known what was already written in Mark, and likely also Luke and Matthew. As we saw, Mark is giving us primarily Peter's perspective. Luke seems to have special material that came from Mary, and has particular interest in the poor and the sick. John, writing later, did not try to repeat what he knew was available elsewhere. It was important to show what Jesus was – yes, a physical man (contrary to what the Docetists said), and yet the very "Logos" – the Word of God, so that if you saw Jesus, you saw God. By the time John wrote, the

Greek-speaking Church could understand this. They would no longer have needed to accommodate those who believed one must first become a Jew to be a Christian.

The lesson book writer spends considerable time pointing out that John is really talking about the “Jewish authorities” when he rails against “The Jews.” This reflects the alienation between the young Christian church and a Judaism that had by then, around 100 A.D., had explicitly rejected Christianity. It is not an ethnic matter. However, later Christians mis-used the language in John to justify persecuting Jews. But there is still that answer to Thomas by Jesus that troubles those of us in the modern world, who would like to think that anyone from any religious background might find salvation. In John 14:6-7:

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Barclay gives some help on this issue. Jesus’s words are an answer to Thomas asking, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How do we know the way?” To a Jew, “the way” meant the way to walk with God, not just in the directions by which we get from one place or the other, but the manner in which we do so. Moses said, “You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God commanded you.” (Deut. 5:33). This is the sense in which Jesus means “way.” He is also the way in a “following directions” sense. Instead of giving complicated directions (as the Gnostics would), he says, “I will show you the way; come, follow me.” Early Christians were followers of “The Way” before they became known as Christians. Jesus has also lived “the truth” of God’s way. It is the way of life.

Still, what are we to make of this? Christianity is the only way to salvation, and anyone who is not Christian is condemned to Hell? This is troubling, but it is a traditional Christian belief. It motivates spreading the gospel, that whoever might hear and believe might be saved. But, what of the Jews? What of Moslems, and Hindus? What of righteous agnostics, who would meet the criteria given in Matthew 25:31-46? (That is the Judgement, “the sheep and the goats,” parable). This is a hard issue. We are torn between Jesus’s literal words in John and our understanding of the Father as a loving and just God. There is no easy answer.

I will offer this thought. I credit this to Dr. Jim Summerhill of First Baptist Church, Richmond. He spoke about this issue during a sermon Cindy and I listened to recently. The essence of it is this: to know God as the loving and merciful God that we see in Jesus, we must go through Jesus. It is Christianity that allows us to

perceive and receive God that way. The Jews are limited to understanding God as Creator and Law-maker, and even as a God who loves them as revealed through the prophets. But they won't be able to address God as Abba – Father, as Jesus did, and as we do. Moslems are limited to the stern authority of God as made known in their sacred writings. As to other religions, it is hard to know. But we do know this – acceptance into the hereafter is up to God, not us. We can believe anything about what might happen to others in eternity, but God, not us, has control of that. What we can hope for is our own salvation, and any of those who we can influence to come into an understanding of Jesus as Lord – Jesus as a way to see and find the God the Father.

The great truth of Christianity is that coming to know God is God's intention for us – he is seeking us whether we seek him or not. It's not a matter of knowledge or cleverness, as the Gnostics would have it. The opportunity is universal. If you read just a bit further after John 3:16, you see Jesus say,

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

For any who can accept this holy Word, God promises acceptance as his children in the world to come, as described later in the Revelation of John.

I am reminded of C.S. Lewis's final Narnia book, *The Last Battle*, in which the world of Narnia is ending. The stars have fallen, and all pass through a door into a magnificent new Narnia, which in the old Narnia was the interior of a small stable. As they go through the door, they are either claimed by the devil or by God (the Judgment). A group of pessimistic dwarves find their way through the door and into the New Narnia. They are afraid, and can only see the stable interior in front of them. They still believe they are merely inside the old crude building. They continue to huddle there, murmuring among themselves. Meanwhile others, accepting that they are children of God, can enjoy a magnificent new Narnia, larger and more spacious than the old one that is ending, indeed, limitless.

We can count on God, and have the great privilege of knowing him through Jesus Christ as a loving God who cares for us, and has provided for us, here and beyond this present realm.

Prayer: *Loving God, as we continue our study of your word in the Gospel of John, enlighten us and inspire us to follow your way. Amen.*