

AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
OF THE GOSPEL
OF JOHN

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Neil C. Damgaard

Box 1118
(new)

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Introduction

Of all the literature of the New Testament, none is perhaps so mystical as the Gospel of John. That mysticism is of a proper brand, however, and leaves us with a particularly enjoyable task in attempting to discover the truths progressively revealed therein. This paper shall seek an introductory statement as to the system of thought contained in the Gospel of John, and the ~~dominant themes~~ which are taught.

The book has been assailed by the higher critical school as unlikely first-century material. The problem of relating this book to the Synoptic Gospels is an interesting one, and largely the point of attack from the higher critical school. But it can be shown quite clearly on the basis of external and internal evidence that the book is Johannine, authoritative and universally received. That debate however, is beyond the purpose of this paper, which shall confine itself strictly to an overview of John's theology contained in his Gospel.

An Overview of the Contents

Before any synthesis of thought can be made, or a collection of dominant themes surveyed, an overview of the content of the book must be made. This is done in the form of a brief outline:

John 1:1,2 the Deity of the Word
:3-5 the preincarnate work of the Word
:6-8 John the Baptist
:9-13 the true Light
:14 the Word became flesh
:15-36 John the Bapt's witness
:37-51 the first disciples

- John 2:1-11 the first miracle (Cana)
 :12-25 Jesus and the desecration of the Temple
 3:1-21 Jesus and Nicodemus
 :22-30 the last testimony of John the Baptist
 :31-36 the Father and the Son
 4:1-45 the Samaritan ministry/ worship in Spirit & Truth
 :46-54 Jesus' 2nd miracle--a healing
 5:1-16 another healing/ the beginning of persecution
 :17-29 the Father and the Son
 :30-47 four witnesses of confirmation
 6:1-14 the feeding of the 5,000
 :15-21 Jesus walks on water
 :22-59 the Bread of Life
 :60-71 disciplēship tested by doctrine
 7:1-9 Jesus and his brothers
 :10-36 Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles
 :37-39 the Living Water
 :40-53 parenthetic comment on the diverse effects of
 8:1-11 the woman found in adultery. Jesus' ministry
 :12-59 the Light of the world
 9:1-34 Jesus heals a man born blind
 :35-41 Jesus' Deity
 10:1-21 the Good Shepherd
 :22-39 Jesus' Deity
 :40-42 withdrawl from Jerusalem
 11:1-44 the raising of Lazarus
 :45-57 many are converted
 12:1-11 Jesus anointed by Mary
 :12-22 Circumstances surrounding Jesus entry into Jerusalem
 :23-50 Jesus foretells His crucifixion
 13:1-20 the servitude of the Savior
 :21-38 Jesus foretells His betrayal
 14:1-31 the comfort of Jesus
 15:1-17 the Vine and the branches/ a new intimacy
 :18-27 believers in the world
 16:1-6 the coming persecution
 :7-15 the Holy Spirit
 :16-33 Jesus speaks of His death and resurrection
 17:1-26 Jesus' prayer
 18-20 Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and ascension.
 21 final instructions of love.

While the book is dominated by discourses (as opposed to parables, etc.), there is a narrative outline overlaid. There are the miracles, the history of Jesus' days in and around Jerusalem, the majority of material presented, and much philosophical reflection/teaching on the part of the author. We must make some kind of a statement

now as to the purpose/argument of the book.

The Purpose and Argument of John

John himself says, "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:31, RSV). The theme of believing is the purpose that ultimately motivated the Apostle to write the book. By the end of the first century, the practice of placing one's trust in Christ alone was already beginning to become confused. The ascetic system, and esoteric knowledge of insipient Gnosticism were already laying siege to the foundations most zealously propogated by Paul, of salvation by faith alone. John was seeing this all around him, and penned his Gospel with a view to bolstering the Pauline efforts. Being acquainted with a mass of traditions, John was very selective. He sought to show those "signs" which would serve his purpose, and to show the overwhelming evidence and worthiness of believing in the risen Messiah.

John is arguing the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and the various benefits which accrue to those who believe in Him. He begins the book with a rather unusually abrupt philosophical homily on the "logos" and the relationship of that "logos" to the last Old Testament type figure, John the Baptist. Then various signs are given in the form of miracles which draw attention to the strictly supernatural aspect of Jesus, ("can demons make a blind man see?") Scattered throughout the book are self-drawn metaphors (using the distinctively Johannine phrase "ego eimi") where Jesus relates His own uniqueness, mission and intentions towards His own. He calls Himself the Bread of Life, the

Light of the World, the Living Water, the Good Shepherd, the Vine and the branches. He uses metaphors understandable by anyone, and as John writes them down, clearly the intention is that unbelievers should see Jesus' uniqueness, and availability as Savior upon belief in Him. John's document uses evidences, philosophical/mystical reasoning, appeal, history and entreaty all to show the necessity and the wonder of life in the Messiah, through cleaving to Him in faith. Now, the major themes must be surveyed, and shown how they fit into John's purpose.

Major Themes

The practice of Biblical Theology begins with the survey of a work with a view to noting what themes recur throughout, and what truth is distinctive to that work alone. As stated, John's purpose in writing is to give the basis from the coming of Messiah for individuals believing in Him personally. The goal of that belief is not faith for faith's sake. It is to gain everlasting life, (John 3:14-16; 4:14; 5:24-39; 6:27-68; 10:10,27,28; 12:25,50; 17:2,3--note also I John 2:25; 3:15; 5:11-13,20; Rev.1:18). This is the key theme in the Gospel of John. The granting of eternal life to the believer is the basis (and the only one) for all the other perspectives which John offers. They all assume that one has been granted eternal life. Without it, none of them makes sense. The Gospel then, spells out several antitheses. The antithesis of the Christian (a believer) and the world is set up. There is no cosmic grey area between the two: they are mutually exclusive ultimately, (John 7:7; 8:23; 14:17;30; 15:19; 17:14). There is the antithesis of light and darkness, symbols of knowledge and sheres of life, (John 1:3-5, 9-13;8:12-59; 12:35,36).

This is called by some the classic Johannine dualism. And, there is the antithetical emphasis of life with death, (John 5:24-26; 6:50-53; 11:26--see also I John 5:12). All of these result in John's mind with a deliberated ethic. The distinction between the believer and the unbeliever, the Christian and the world, the light and the darkness, is primarily demonstrated in the love for the brethren.

In John, vocabulary plays an important role. In addition to eternal life, light and darkness, etc., many words appear frequently that are used sparingly in the Synoptic Gospels; both the verb and the noun love; truth, true and genuine; to know; to work; world; to judge; to abide; to send; to witness. But especially prominent from a vocabulary standpoint, is TO BELIEVE; th believe unto eternal life! The process is emphasized of believing while in the world now, and the fruit is eternal life eschatologically (distinctively Johannine). All of these tie into the overall argument.

Abiding in Christ as the means of maintaining life and light is prevalent also. Apart from Him we can do nothing, and the fruit which we bear reflects the degree to which that abiding in the Vine has taken place.

In a real sense, John is showing that the Christian is to be "other-world" minded. He is not saying that believers are to separate themselves from the world (indeed he would have loathed that asceticism). But upon belief and the resultant experience of conversion/regeneration, all things change. A man is transferred from darkness to light, from death to life, contingent nowhere in John on any kind of works. It is contingent upon believing in Him, in relying on Him for that Living Water. These are concepts only the

believer can really comprehend, but ones which must be presented in John's view to unbelievers; this is the philosophical rationale which must be given to unbelievers, that they may believe. Jesus' ministry and credentials hold up under critical scrutiny--John displays this in those narrative sections which he does give. But the example of the Upper Room discourse is so predominant (the new intimacy with those who are His), that we cannot ignore the central idea of union with Him and the life and light which that can only bring.

It is not surprising that as an old man, John would concentrate on these things. The dialectics of Paul were well circulated by now, and refocussing on the basic pillar-truth was paramount. No matter what else befalls us, we must flee to, and cling to Jesus--in this sense the ministry was simple. Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my lambs." The bottom line of the Christian experience is abiding in Christ through faith. This is what John in his waning years longed to see again heralded in the churches and in the world.