

Introduction

1. Introduction

We are going to read the Gospel of John together. In this first outline, we wish to make some introductory comments about this Gospel. We will attempt to obtain an overview of the main theme, and to discover how the various points form a unified whole. Much could be said about this, far beyond the scope of this outline. We will therefore confine ourselves to several principle points. Those who wish to gain a better understanding of the many related issues (and who can follow Dutch) we may refer to the introductory chapters of the *Korte Verklaring* on the Gospel of John, Volume 1, by Dr. C Bouma. Every now and then we will cite something from his expositions.

2. Author

Even though critical Bible scholars have often disputed it, the oldest Christian traditions, without exception, agree that the author of our Gospel was John, the son of Zebedee, and the brother of James: the two fisherman's sons from Bethsaida or Capernaum, where their father ran a flourishing business.

Can we show from the Gospel itself that John was the author? Not directly, because the writer does not mention his name anywhere. There are, however, a number of indirect indicators which lend support and give much credence to the traditional view.

In the first place, there is the repeated evidence that the writer was an eye and ear witness from the beginning of Jesus' official appearance (John 1:14; 19:35; 21:24; cf. also 1 John 1:1-3). Other places in the Gospel also show us the writer as an eye witness, and as one of the disciples (e.g. read 1:35-51; 3:22-26; 4:27-28; 6:10; etc.).

In the second place, although the writer does not mention his name, he does refer to himself several times as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23; 19:26; 20:21; 21:7,20), and he says clearly in 21:24 that it is this disciple "who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things".

Who is this "disciple whom Jesus loved"? To answer this question, we will need to compare several passages. From 21:1-2 it appears that he was a fisherman. This immediately limits the choice to three men: Peter, James, and John. These are the disciples who are often mentioned

together (cf. Matthew 17:1; Luke 8:51; Matthew 26:37). Well, it is not Peter, since he is often mentioned along with the writer (cf. 13:23-24; 20:2; 21:20). It cannot be James either, because he was killed by Herod very soon after Pentecost. That leaves only John.

If, then, John is the author of our Gospel, it also explains why he does not mention his name as such. John was the longest surviving Apostle of the Lord, and very much honoured in the congregation. To minimise this, he kept himself in the background, so that the light would fall **only** on Christ. Thus it also becomes clear why he - in contrast to the other Evangelists - says nothing at all about his family. He does not, in any way, want his Gospel to bear the authority of the old, highly revered Apostle, but exclusively the authority of Jesus, who is the Christ.

3. Unity and Difference

It becomes quite evident to all who read this Gospel of John that it has a completely different structure and, in many respects, also a different content from that of the other three Gospels.

While the first three present, in general, a similar structure, the Gospel of John deviates from this considerably. It has its own particular starting point and shows its own structure. Much of what is written in the other Gospels cannot be found here. On the other hand, we find in John many of the Saviour's elaborate discourses which we do not read like **this** in the other Gospels.

This is actually one of the main arguments used by critical Bible scholars to deny that John wrote this Gospel. They say that it was someone else, one living much later, who put down onto paper his views about the person Jesus.

We reject this critical view, not only because it has become clear to us that John is the author of the Gospel, but also because the above-mentioned differences can be explained in an entirely different way.

We must first realise, however, that there is no essential difference between the Gospels. John has the same purpose as the others - to say it with the words of Luke (Acts 1:1,2): to relate to us "all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when He was taken up". John's story, too, is the story of the words and works of that historical Person: Jesus of Nazareth, Who proved in His words and works that He is the Christ; Son of God and Son of Man, sent by God and come for the salvation of the world. In this message, in this preaching, John is one with the other Evangelists. The difference in approach and style between John and the others can be understood when we take other factors into account. Firstly I point to the:

4. Time

Ancient Christian tradition tells us that John spent many of the last years of his life living and working in Ephesus, where he eventually also died at a very old age. It is fairly certain that this was also the place where John wrote this Gospel towards the end of his life, probably between the years 80 and 90 AD.

Two things follow from this: in the first place, that by then the other three Gospels had already been written and were widely known in the congregations. John therefore writes knowing about the existence and general knowledge of the Gospels. Thus he assumes, for example, that his readers already know the story of John the Baptist (see 1:15,19,28; 3:24); and that they know that the Lord Jesus chose twelve disciples (cf. 6:67).

Another thing to be mentioned here is that also the

5. Purpose

of John's Gospel is somewhat different from that of the other three. These three were written with the special intent to lead and bring the people - Jews and Gentiles - to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Saviour and Redeemer of the world. When John writes his Gospel, however, the congregations of Christ have already been established and these congregations have already attained a certain consolidation. What these congregations still needed was the deepening and enrichment of their faith. They have accepted Christ as their Saviour, but now have to grow and make further progress in that faith. They should obtain a still fuller, deeper and richer knowledge of Jesus as the Christ.

That, in particular, is the purpose of John's Gospel: the building up and deepening of the already present knowledge of Jesus Christ.

There is something we must add. These young, Christian churches very soon came into contact with all sorts of errors and heresies (see Outline 2). From the very beginning, Satan directed his attacks to the congregation of Christ, to rob her of her faith. People began to doubt and even reject that Christ was the Son of God, and that He truly became man.

Thus, we begin to see something of the background and purpose of this Gospel and of the

6. Content

which John chose especially for this description of the Gospel. Everything is going to centre around these *two pivotal points*: that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God **and** that He is the Son of man. John

powerfully summarised this in the statement which can be called the great *Theme* of his Gospel: “and the *Word* became *flesh* and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory as of *the only Son of the Father* “. The content material which John chooses for his narrative concentrates itself on these two pivotal points.

To accentuate this, John chose the content material for his narrative especially from the time and work of the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem and Judea, while the other Evangelists tell especially about His words and works in Galilee. This also helps to explain the differences between John on the one hand and the other three on the other hand. The Lord Jesus said different things in Galilee than in Judea. “In Galilee He found simple people, who yearned for deliverance from the yoke of the Scribes. He spoke there in very simple terms and adorned His speech with images suggested to Him by the sunny hills of Galilee and by the waters of the sea of Tiberias. In Jerusalem, however, He was confronted by Jewish officialdom, by Israel’s theologians. He came face to face with the refinements of civilisation, with the conditions and the complexities of the large cities, with the high cultural life of the people. Is it then surprising that the Son of God speaks to these people in a different manner than amongst the farmers and the fishermen of Galilee?” (Bouma)

7. “I am He”

We must pay attention to yet another factor.

Through the preaching of the Apostle Paul, the Gospel entered the heathen world. The young congregations were therefore completely surrounded by heathendom. Now, the heathendom of that time was filled with a profound desire for freedom, deliverance, peace, and happiness. The belief in the gods had run its course and no longer satisfied the people; there was no fulfilment of their most innate cravings. You see something of this when Paul comes to Athens. Amongst the very many temples and altars he finds also an altar erected “to an unknown god”.

Many individuals, presenting themselves as travelling preachers, ‘philosophers’, had taken advantage of this general hankering by the people after deliverance and happiness. They preached a ‘gospel’ that was purported to bring happiness. Countless ‘saviours’ were promulgated. Famed, e.g., was the worship of Asclepius in Pergamum; think also of individuals as Simon the Sorcerer in Samaria (Acts 8) and Elymas on Cyprus (Acts 13). Amidst all these ‘gospels’ the Church now preached *the* Gospel: the only and true Gospel of the only and true Saviour and Redeemer Jesus Christ. This Gospel is exclusive: it does not allow itself

to be tied to or integrated with other 'gospels'. It preaches the only Saviour of the world, Who will tolerate no other 'saviours' beside Him.

In this light we understand one of the typical characteristics of John's Gospel: recurrently we hear in it the preaching of Christ, "I am He"; I alone and I exclusively! "I am He Who was sent by God; the Bread of life; the Light of the world; the Way, the Truth, and the Life".

Note: It is most important that you carefully read the Gospel for yourself. Have a pencil and paper ready as you read and jot down all the statements of the Lord Jesus that contain the words, "I am".

8. The Passover Lamb

Connected to the preceding is a second characteristic of this Gospel. In order to present Jesus as the only true Redeemer of the world, John preaches Him as "the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world", John 1:29. That preaching runs as a golden thread through the entire Narrative. For that reason - and that, too, explains his own particular choice of content - John concentrates his Gospel narration on the appearances of Jesus during the time of the Passover feasts. In chapter 2:13,23 we find the Lord at the first of His Passover feast appearances. In chapter 5 we hear about the second Passover feast. In chapter 6:4 the third Passover feast is mentioned, and in chapter 12 we come to the fourth and final Passover feast, during which celebration He will be slaughtered as the true Passover Lamb. In this way it is the intention in the entire Gospel to preach the Lord Christ as the Lamb of God, slain for sin and for the redemption of the world.

9. We Behold

Thirdly, connected with this central preaching is that we may designate as third characteristic of this Gospel the fact that we may call it the Gospel of 'Seeing'. John directs our attention to this constantly: the Gospel is not just one of the many theories - abstract views and ideas about some happy life - which were peddled everywhere. The Gospel does not advertise one of the vague, hazy 'saviour' figures, but it is the preaching of the Redeemer sent by God, the Word made flesh, whose glory was *seen*. It is the preaching of Him, in Whom God's thoughts of redemption over a world lost in sin were now actually *beheld*. John needs the whole Greek dictionary, with its many variant renderings of the verb 'to see', in order to constantly direct our attention to this fact, compare also 1 John 1:1-3. With this in mind read again the first chapter and record how many times the words 'see', 'behold', and 'bear witness' appear!

All these characteristics of the Gospel of John have as it were been summed up in those two texts which together form the theme of the whole narrative, 1:14, and 1:29.

Questions

1. *Why is knowledge about the author of a Bible book important for our faith? Discuss this question with reference to the following texts: Acts 1:21-22; Ephesians 2:20; 2 Peter 1:15-16; and also the concluding part of the Gospel of John, 19:35, and 20:30; 21:24.*
2. *What reasons can be given for the difference between (the content of) the Gospel of John and the other three Gospel narratives?*
3. *One of the characteristics mentioned in the Outline is the “I am” texts. Read the Gospel and write down for yourself all these sayings. What main theme of the Gospel can you now see?*