

The Gospel of John

Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel

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Contents

1	Lecture 1: The Structure of John's Gospel	3
2	Lecture 2: Structure Revealing Meaning	9
	About the Author	19

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1

Lecture 1: The Structure of John's Gospel

Structure Revealing Meaning

There are many different ways of studying the New Testament, and all of them maybe have some value. In the Gospels a tremendous amount of detailed source and form-criticism analysis has been done, much of it exceedingly helpful. But there is a limitation attached to this particular method of study. It is possible for our view of a book to become so fragmented that the book suffers a kind of Humpty Dumpty disaster: out of the many fragments that our detailed analysis has produced we are unable to put the book back together again; and so we lose the impact of the message of the book as a whole. We should not forget in all our study that the divinely inspired writers were efficient literary workmen, to say the least of it. They have given their work a literary structure, the function of which is deliberately designed to communicate, and is itself part of, the message. We may compare the somewhat different literary form of a play, where the division into acts and scenes is itself an integral part of the message and helps to communicate that message.

So I have entitled this study of John's Gospel: 'Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel', intending to imply that a study of the overall structure of the book will help us to gain some idea of the general message of the book.

The literary structure of John's Gospel

Now let me demonstrate to begin with then, the bare bones of the literary structure. Starting in chapter 1 and extending to the end of 2:12, we have what we may call the introduction, the prologue to the book. At the other end, we have in chapter 21 of the Gospel what we may call its epilogue. In between, the whole of the Gospel is taken up with four, or some people would count five, visits to Jerusalem made by our Lord. Let me point out John's own references to these visits in his book.

The first journey (2:13-4:54)

If we turn to 2:13 we are told that, 'the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.' And very naturally it proceeds to tell us that in the temple, which was of course at Jerusalem, he found this and that and the other. Verse 23 further emphasizes the point: 'Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast many believed in his name'. Chapter 3 follows and tells us that there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (v. 1), and there is a certain amount of evidence to suggest that when John talks of Jews, he means in particular the people who dwelled in Judea. So then our Lord, being in Jerusalem, the capital city, was available for discussion with this academic theologian, this Jewish rabbi, whose headquarters were in Jerusalem. Then in 3:22 we are told that Jesus and his disciples

went into the land of Judea. That is, so to speak, he has left the capital city itself and gone into the surrounding country.

Then in chapter 4, we find these words: 'Now when our Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John . . . , he left Judea and departed again to Galilee' (vv. 1–3). So now, having gone down to Jerusalem, our Lord is beginning to return. He has come through the surrounding countryside of Judea; now he is leaving Judea, going back towards Galilee and, as he goes, we are told he had to pass through Samaria. Subsequently, the story tells us that he stayed in Samaria for a short while and we read in 4:43 that after two days he departed from there into Galilee. Then John seems to go out of his way to remind us of what is happening, that our Lord has in fact been down from the north to the south on a visit to Jerusalem. He has been gradually returning, coming through Judea and then Samaria and has now reached back home in the north, for in verse 45 he says, 'So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast, for they too had gone to the feast'; and then, in verse 47, a certain man came to Christ, 'when he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee'. And, as though that were not enough, John concludes this part of his work in verse 54, saying, 'This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.' John does not wish us to forget that our Lord had been on this journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and back again to Galilee. So now we have covered the first return journey.

The second journey (5:1–6:71)

Then chapter 5 begins, interestingly enough, with this: 'there was a feast of the Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem' (v. 1). John isn't interested in anything that happens in between. He's interested solely in this particular theme: our Lord's visits to Jerusalem and his return from there. He continues in verse 2 of chapter 5. Now there is in Jerusalem (in case you haven't been there to see for yourself) by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Hebrew called *Bethzatha*.¹ At the end of chapter 5, we are not told explicitly that our Lord returned north, but we are left to infer that, because in chapter 6 we find him by the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberius (v. 1). But although he is now in the far north again, John wants us to remember that the time of Passover is drawing near, so he says in verse 4 of this chapter, 'Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.' When our Lord went up to Jerusalem on the occasion of that feast, we are not told. What we are told is that the events of chapter 6 took place, so to speak, in the framework of the near celebration of the Feast of Passover.

The third journey (7:1–10:42)

When the events of chapter 6 are concluded, we come to chapter 7, and once more we find ourselves at the beginning of a journey to Jerusalem. 'After this, Jesus went about in Galilee', and we are told in verse 2: 'Now the Jews' Feast of Tabernacles was at hand.' His brothers go up but, for the moment, he declines to go up. In verse 8 he says to his brothers, "'Go to the feast yourselves. I'm not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.'" So saying, he remained in Galilee, but after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up,

¹ More commonly now rendered in English Bibles as 'Bethesda'.

not publicly, but in private' (vv. 8–10). So here then, is the third visit of our Lord to Jerusalem, this time on the occasion of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The account of this third visit extends through chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10. Whether our Lord then went away from Jerusalem or whether he stayed on in Jerusalem for the next festival, we are not explicitly told, but we do find, however, in 10:22–23, that it was the Feast of the Dedication at Jerusalem, and it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the Portico of Solomon. Whether he went away and came back again or whether he stayed on, is perhaps immaterial. We are still in this general theme: our Lord's visit to Jerusalem on the occasion of some of the national festivals. At the end of chapter 10, however, we are told that our Lord went away again across the Jordan to the place where John at first baptised and there he remained (v. 40). With that, we have come to the end of the third journey.

The fourth journey (11:1–20:31)

Chapter 11 begins: 'Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha' (v. 1). And our Lord, much to the consternation of his disciples, determines to go, and eventually does go, back to Judea, to Bethany, which is but a very short distance from Jerusalem. He raises Lazarus from the dead and then retires for a moment, so we are told in 11:54, to a little wilderness town called Ephraim, and there he stayed. But the very next verse tells us that the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and that many Jews went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves (v. 55). They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another, as they stood in the temple, 'What do you think, that he will not come to the feast?' (v. 56). So then our Lord has raised Lazarus at Bethany—a small distance from Jerusalem. He retires for a moment, while the pilgrim crowds come surging down the roads that lead to Jerusalem. They come through Bethany; they hear the story of Lazarus' resurrection, and they meet in Jerusalem's streets, all agog to know whether this Jesus will come to the feast so that they may see him. Chapter 12 tells us that, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany (v. 1).

Then in verse 12, the next day, a great crowd who had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. They met him with palm branches and welcomed him into the city. This, as we know, was his last visit to Jerusalem. On this famous and fatal occasion, he was crucified. And chapters 12–19 are concerned with this final visit to Jerusalem that ended in his crucifixion and burial. Or rather I ought to say that it ended, as chapter 20 tells us, with his resurrection and reappearance to his disciples in the upper room at Jerusalem. But with chapter 20, the fourth journey finishes, and we are left with nothing but the epilogue.²

The significance of the journeys

So then, I have tried to demonstrate the very obvious and elementary thing that John, apart from his epilogue and prologue, is concerned totally with these visits to Jerusalem and the return from Jerusalem. Now if we look around for the significance of this particular literary arrangement, we shall find it staring us in the face. All these visits were made on the occasion

² The exact starting point of this fourth journey may be at 11:1, later in ch. 11 or at 12:12. Though he discusses the possibilities elsewhere, he did not clarify the point further on this occasion. (Ed.)

of the Jewish national and religious festivals. These festivals were a time of holiday, of course. They were a time also of family re-gathering, as Jews from the Dispersion and Jews from Palestine would down their tools and put on their Sabbath best and go up to Jerusalem to engage in the happy festivities of the national festivals. But, of course, they had a deeper meaning than a mere social gathering. On these occasions, the Jews would gather together for their great national and corporate acts of the worship and service of God in the temple. These festivals would recall some great historic event in the life of the nation, in which the nation had experienced a particular manifestation of God's grace or power, and these moments would be moments of sacred remembrance and deeper dedication to God.

Now to these festivals, John tells us, our Lord Jesus Christ goes. Why? Well in the first place, of course, he would go as a pious Jew, but to get John's point, we must remember that in the prologue, John has explained to us that this Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the eternal Word of God, now incarnate in human form. He is after all the Son of God who all men should worship, even as they worship the Father. Indeed, in chapter 12 of his Gospel, John puts this in a very pointed way. He recalls Isaiah's prophecy, in chapter 6, where Isaiah saw a vision of the throne in the heavenly temple occupied by the King, the Lord of Hosts, and all heaven was engaged in worshipping him. But then in chapter 12 when John quotes these words, he talks of the glory of the great occupant of that great heavenly throne, and then he says, 'These things said Isaiah, when he saw his glory and spoke of him' (v. 41). In the context the 'his' is a reference to Jesus Christ our Lord. So then what John is saying in the structure of his book is this: the Jews had these national festivals when they engaged in corporate and public worship and service of God, but he who was the Word of God, the rightful receiver of the worship of heaven and of the human heart, who became flesh and tabernacled among us, mingled himself with the crowds that went up to Jerusalem City to take part in the worship of God. And as he moved among them, he listened to their acts of worship, quietly assessing their value, their reality, their intensity, and as he listened he began to make suggestions to them on the way that their worship could become deepened, could become more real, could become more meaningful and could benefit from that renewal, that resurgence of life that he had come to inject into it. Let us think for a moment, therefore, of the significance to the Jew of his worship and service in the temple at Jerusalem. It contained a welter of symbols.

The double function of the symbols: looking back and ahead

They were symbols of spiritual truths. Take, for instance, the Passover, one of the most famous feasts. It was a time of religious ritual and ceremony but, behind those rituals and ceremonious symbols there was a literal historic event in the past history of the nation when God had delivered them from the slave labour camps of Egypt. At that time, the Israelites had had a tremendous experience of the power of God. That experience of God's power in deliverance had been indeed at the basis of their nationhood. But, just as we find in our Christian worship, it was desperately easy for the Jew to concentrate his attention simply on the symbol and the ritual, and to fail to bring up to his memory or incorporate in his own experience the practical, spiritual experience that the ritual and symbol were meant to evoke. So Christ had come to point these people to the deeper spiritual experience and reality that lay behind their symbols.

In the second place, these symbols pointed forward to the coming of Christ and to all those deeper and fuller self-revelations of God and the consequent spiritual experience made available to his people. His task, as he went to these festivals in Jerusalem, was to point the people from their symbols and religious experience that they already had, into these deeper experiences of God that his own coming made available. For instance, to recur to this illustration of the Passover, the Passover symbols reminded them of a literal historical event—their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. At the same time it was meant to be a pointer to a greater deliverance from greater bondage. So we read, particularly in the later parts of John's Gospel, about a prince of this world, dark and sinister, much more terrible than ever any Egyptian pharaoh was, a prince of this world who holds men and women in a spiritual, rather than a political or social, bondage (see 12:31, 14:30). And from this bondage Christ has come to redeem mankind by the sacrifice of himself as the real, authentic, meaningful Passover Lamb.

So our Lord had come to lead his Jewish people into these deeper spiritual experiences but, of course, in that was involved a tremendous difficulty. To use the old saying, a man who has drunk old wine does not straightway desire new wine. A man who has for his lifetime been brought up in the service of God to concentrate on the present, the seen, the tangible, the things that can be perceived by the senses, is going to find it a little bit disconcerting maybe, and difficult, to be led on past these things to the eternal and spiritual, the invisible. We may not be surprised, therefore, when we find that the people at large found Christ's teaching very difficult. Many of them in fact completely rejected it. When we come to the end of John's Gospel, we find this sad tragedy, that here were the people worshipping God; and the very God that they were supposedly worshipping had come down in the person of Christ and was standing among them. When he attempted to lead them into the realities of the symbols that they were using, when he attempted to lead them into these deeper experiences of God, they eventually grew so tired of him that they took him outside Jerusalem's gate and hanged him on a tree, and then went back to worshipping God.

Yet we Christians must not, as we read this, adopt a superior attitude, as though we couldn't possibly ourselves be guilty of this kind of contradictory behaviour. We ought to remember perhaps that in the last book of the New Testament, the Apocalypse, we get what is a very similar situation. Here it is not Christ going up to Jerusalem on the occasion of the Jewish religious festivals, but the risen and glorified Christ seen walking among his churches. And, as he walks, he criticizes: praising the virtues of his Christian churches, pointing out their errors and faults, calling them to genuine repentance and renewal. When we come to the last church, by name the church of Laodicea, we find that Christ is outside that church, obliged to knock upon the door of any individual's heart that he may find willing to open that door and admit him (Rev 3:20). It is all too possible for us Christian people too, just like the Jews, to get so used to our round of religious symbol and church festival that we fail to go deeper behind the external forms of our religion to the great spiritual truths that they symbolize. Who amongst us hasn't, for instance, eaten his Christmas cake and mince pies, and celebrated religious festivals at Easter, without necessarily entering fully and wholeheartedly into the spiritual experiences that these great festivals symbolize for us?

So then, if we come to the fourth Gospel with these things in mind, we shall find that old and familiar stories take on a new light. They ask those of us who read to be prepared to work with Christ, as he evaluates for us the worship and service of the ancient Jewish people, and to be willing ourselves to evaluate our own worship and service of God, so that we may enter fully into the meaning of the religious symbol, and also that we may make sure that we have moved on into the full enjoyment of the complete and mature revelation of God that Christ has brought to us.

This then is my general thesis. I think, as you see, that it was John's general thesis. Let me try now to demonstrate how this works by taking the first journey that our Lord made to Jerusalem, along with its return, and showing you how that what John tells us, as he chooses his material from what was available to him, is all strung along this particular thread of the worship and service of God: its analysis, its renewal.

Lecture 2: Structure Revealing Meaning

The Major Theme of the First Journey

The major incidents

We read in chapter 2 and verse 13 that our Lord went up to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, and the immediate thing that is said is this: that in the temple, he found those that were selling oxen and sheep, and he cleansed the temple. Here immediately is our main theme: the Jewish worship and service of God. Our Lord goes straight to the temple and is obliged to cleanse it.

The next big story is in chapter 3: our Lord's conversation with Nicodemus. He was 'the master' in Israel, 'the teacher' in Israel, if we may translate the Greek of the New Testament literally. He was what we in our terminology in the Christian church would call, perhaps, the canon theologian, or at least a professor of theology. Once more then we are moving in the same sphere. We are not now dealing with a tax gatherer or a woman of the streets. We are thinking of this idea of the worship and service of God. We have had the temple; now we are having an interview with the rabbi, the professor of theology.

In the second half of chapter 3, in the next major incident to be recorded, we have a story about John the Baptist whom the Pharisees and their representatives went out to interview to ask who he was. And then a discussion arose between John's disciples and these Jews over purifying, and in reply John gave his testimony to our Lord. Now John the Baptist, of course, made a vivid contrast to Nicodemus. If Nicodemus was the academic, rabbinic theologian, John was a much more popular preacher, but still we are continuing this theme. If we would understand the Jewish religious state at the time, we must be prepared to consider not only the formal theologian, but also the much more popular preacher and prophet out in the wilderness who was attracting the vast, massive crowds around him to listen to his somewhat more sensational messages.

Then the next major incident in chapter 4 is the story of the woman whom our Lord met at a well side in Samaria, and the conversation he has with her turns immediately on this same main subject that we have already noticed. They fall to talking about worship: God being spirit, the Father seeking people to worship him, and the woman discusses with Christ that grievous problem that so vexed the Samaritan and Jewish communities: Where is the right place to worship? 'Our fathers worshipped in this mountain,' she said, 'and you Jews take the view that Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship' (v. 20). Now more of that shortly, but this seems to show again that my thesis is somewhere near correct. All these major

incidents in this first visit to Jerusalem, and its return, are concerned with this theme of the worship and service of God.

Now let's go over those major items in this first section and see a little more of their detail.

The detail of the major incidents

The first major incident: Cleansing the temple

The first story then tells us of our Lord's cleansing of the temple in the time of Passover. When he was challenged as to his authority to do this, he said, 'Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days' (2:19). The Jews, of course, were mystified by this language; they thought he meant the literal temple. He, of course, referred to the temple of his body, and he was citing as his authority, his own resurrection—the divine power that would raise him from the dead and so vindicate his claims.

Now we may feel at first sight that this was a little unfair on Christ's part to cite to these Jews an event that had not yet happened, as his authority for cleansing the temple. Actually, of course, he wasn't being unfair or unnecessarily provocative. He had come, and he was by his action, criticizing their system of worship: its emptiness, its perversion, but the only vindication of his criticism that could possibly be of weight to these Jews was, in the first place, his own resurrection that finally demonstrated that he was who he claimed to be and, therefore, had a right to criticize them. And in the second place, it is probably true that the only man who will eventually see force in our Lord's criticism that the Jewish religion had become exceedingly empty and dead, is a man who himself has believed in Christ and has experienced in his own life the surge of spiritual power that comes from the risen Lord himself, and so stimulates, provokes and indeed causes that outburst of living, vital worship of God that is genuine Christianity.

But now, if the Jews couldn't possibly know at this stage anything about Christ's resurrection and were strangers to the idea that, from Christ, we too can receive spiritual power, they ought to have known something about spiritual power. After all, this was a Passover, and one of the things that happened at the first Passover was that God came down and delivered his people from the slave labour camps of Egypt, by 'an outstretched arm'; that is, by an exercise of immense spiritual power (see Deut 26:8; Ps 136:12). As they stood on the banks of the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's chariots coming up behind them in fact, it became a showdown, a contest between the invisible power of almighty God and the very real looking chariots of iron—the material forces of Egypt. And the nation's experience of the invisible power of God on that occasion not only brought them deliverance, but formed the basis and springboard of their subsequent worship of God (Exod 14–15). Not only did they stand on the further bank of the Red Sea and praise God with every cymbal that they could possibly get their hands on, but then, when God invited them to build him a tabernacle, in their gratitude and their fresh personal experience of God's power, they brought their goods and their gold, and they contributed so much money to the building of the tabernacle that God had to tell them, through Moses, to stop; they were bringing too much (36:5–6). But what a reversal of things we see when our Lord goes out to this particular Passover in Jerusalem. Instead of

finding a nation vibrant and vigorous with the personal experience of the power of God, giving and giving, and giving willingly, until they have to be restrained, we find a nation at such a low ebb that the very temple court is filled with people making money out of religion. And instead of the temple being a place where people might come and have dispensed to them the power of God, to help them in their daily living, the temple became a place full of racketeers who, by exploiting the situation, made the people think that the religion and service of God was an added financial burden in life that made the wheels of life drag heavily. What a happy thing it would have been for Israel if they could have been brought back to their experience of the power of God, such as their fathers had at the Red Sea, so that they might have come back through this experience into that joyful situation where a man abandonedly gives himself and his resources, all of them, unreservedly to God.

We in Christianity do well to learn this lesson too. It is the lesson that Paul himself, writing to his converts at Ephesus, underlines. These converts had been converted from the pagan worship of Artemis and of that sacred stone that was so desperately weak that it fell down from heaven (Acts 19). Now writing to them, Paul prays, so he tells us, that the eyes of their hearts should be enlightened that they might know, among other things:

what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might, which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is to come . . . And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked . . . but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (1:19–2:6)

With this extensive reference to our Lord's resurrection, Paul is of course referring to the same thing as our Lord mentioned to the Pharisees when he talked about destroying the temple and raising it again in three days. But Paul brings out the point that Christ's own resurrection has made available to those who trust him, this same exceeding great power of God. It is available to them for the purposes of personal renewal and regeneration, and then to be the springboard and driving power in the worship and service of God that will lead them in that vigorous and exhilarating offering of themselves and all their resources, in the willing service and worship of God.

The second major incident: Nicodemus

Now if in the first major story of this particular section, we find that Christ discerns in the low ebb of Jewish worship at Jerusalem a desperate lack in their personal experience of the power of God, the second major story of this section seems to offer an explanation of this state of affairs. For it records a conversation between our Lord and one of the professors of theology at Jerusalem, and it is reasonable to suppose that the theological views held by this learned

rabbi and his colleagues would eventually filter down to the masses and colour their religious experience.

Now our Lord spoke to Nicodemus, so we are told, on the topic of that initial experience of the power of God that brings about personal renewal and regeneration, and so initiates a man into the kingdom and service of God. Significantly enough, when he broached this topic with Nicodemus, he drew a complete blank from the learned professor. Nicodemus did not know what was even meant by the term 'being born again' and still less did he understand what this means in terms of personal experience. Our Lord laid his finger on his inadequacy, an inadequacy both of knowledge and of belief. Our Lord said to him, 'Are you the teacher in Israel and do not know these things?' (3:10).

Nicodemus, it seems, had inadequate knowledge: he did not know what was meant by the term. But in addition to inadequate knowledge, Nicodemus had an inadequacy in the area of personal faith. Devoted and patient as his academic study of holy Scripture had been, he had not yet learned what it meant to believe; at least what it meant to believe in the sense that opens up a channel between the soul and God, through which the mighty regenerating power of God will flow. Perhaps it was that in all his study, Nicodemus had tended to substitute thinking and reasoning for believing, or perhaps it was that until now, Nicodemus had not found God to be in clear enough focus so as to focus his faith. At any rate, our Lord's answer to this inadequacy was to present himself to Nicodemus using the analogy of the nation's earlier experience in the wilderness.

Under Moses the nation in the wilderness had sinned, and God had sent serpents among them which bit the people so that they were dying, and in their desperate situation God commanded Moses to make a serpent of bronze, put it upon a pole and command the people to look to that serpent, and whoever looked found new life. So did our Lord gently suggest to Nicodemus that it is when a man comes to the end of his own spiritual resources, discovers his bankruptcy before God and learns to cast himself entirely upon God and upon Christ's redeeming sacrifice, then it is that a man, believing God from the whole of his heart, finds opened a channel for the redemptive energies of God to flow into his life.

The third major incident: John the Baptist

Now we move on to the third major incident in this section, which records a conversation that the bystanders had with John the Baptist. Actually, in my introductory remarks, I called John the Baptist a popular preacher, which was a little unworthy of me maybe, for, after all, John the Baptist, according to our Lord, was the greatest of all the prophets (Luke 7:28). I called him a popular preacher simply because in his day John drew tremendous crowds to hear his preaching, and his preaching was accompanied, as we may gather, by a good deal of emotion and religious intensity. It is, however, interesting to listen to this conversation and in it to discern his principles as a preacher. We may sum them up in the words 'the supremacy of Christ'. John, in his witness to the crowd and to the enquirers, gave this testimony: 'He that comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and of the earth he speaks. He who comes from heaven is above all' (3:31).

Added to this vivid concept of the supremacy of Christ and his unique authority, John had a most intimate way of expressing his task as a mediator between God and the people. He

said, speaking of Christ, 'He that has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice, therefore, this joy of mine is now full' (v. 29). John likened his activity as a preacher to the activity of a man who introduces a girl to her future husband and, upon that introduction, he sparks off, so to speak, an affair of the heart. Now this surely is the task of any preacher who would lead his fellow men and women into experience of God. Like John, he must keep in view the supremacy and absolute unique authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, but he must not rest until he has brought his congregation into this personal experience, this affair of the heart with Jesus Christ.

The fourth major incident: The woman of Samaria

Leaving John the Baptist then, we come to the next major incident in this section, and at once we are thrown into the middle of a bitter religious controversy. In chapter 4 we have arrived in Samaria, and there our Lord enters a conversation with a Samaritan woman. The conversation turns to the matter of worship, and of course the question of worship was an exceedingly controversial and sore topic between Jews and Samaritans. It centred around the question: Where was the right place to worship? And in this bitter argument, doubtless the Jews had right on their side in the sense that God had laid down that Jerusalem was the place where men ought to worship, and our Lord does not deny this. In fact, to the woman he eventually says that, 'Salvation is of the Jews' (v. 22). On the other hand, we must admit that the Jews, though Orthodox in their belief, had been somewhat bitter, and possibly cruel, towards these non-conformist Samaritans, and there had grown up between them a terrible gulf, both socially and religiously, so that Jews would not even use the same eating vessels as the Samaritans.

Now it is evident that this woman, in the middle of the trials and disappointments of life, had found religion somewhat unsatisfying. Indeed, it may well have left a bitter taste in her mouth, but it is interesting to trace the causes of this dissatisfaction with religion. In the course of her conversation she makes evident what her concepts of religion were. They were, first of all, that religion is a kind of charitable social force. She talked of Jacob, her distant forefather, who had dug a well and given it to his children. Digging wells in those ancient times was, of course, a very worthy task of social welfare. Religion eventually will express itself, if it be true religion, in social benefit to the community, but true religion does not start with social work, and indeed its heart is elsewhere. Again, the woman, in thinking of religion, speedily raised this aforementioned topic of the place where people ought to worship. To her, religion was a matter of denominational dispute as to the right way of going about things. Certainly there is importance in the topic, 'What is the right way to worship God?', but then the right place to worship God, though it is an important topic, is not the heart of the whole business. All that the woman had, it would seem, in addition to this, is some vague idea, perhaps picked up in the reading of the Old Testament, that one day Messiah would come and settle all these disputes once and for all. But until he came, certainty could not be reached in anything, and hence the old disputes must drag on unsatisfactorily forever.

Christ that afternoon, leapt over the wall that had separated her from the Jews at Jerusalem, and not only so, but he turned religion and the worship and service of God into a vital and

sparkling reality. It is interesting to watch how he did so. His words were to her, first of all, 'Give me a drink' (v. 7). In other words, though she was a Samaritan, he was telling her that he wanted her, he needed her; he needed her friendship, and that God in Christ was seeking that woman because, frankly, he loved her and needed her. And then when, in her amazement she failed to give him that drink of water, he began to speak to her of a satisfaction that is deeper than literal water. He said, 'If you had known the gift of God and who it is that speaks with you, you would have asked of him and he would have given you the living water' (v. 10). Again, I imagine this was a surprise to this woman who probably thought that religion is concerned with what we give God, whereas Christ was putting it now the other way round. True religion begins not with what we give God, but with what God gives us. 'God,' says Christ, 'has a gift to give.' It is living water, water that bubbles up within the heart and satisfies. And this gift is not something that we work up by spiritual discipline; it is something that Christ gives us as an initial *sine qua non*.³ Ours it is to recognize that there is such a gift, that we need that gift, and then simply and humbly to ask for it. Whereupon, says Christ, he will give us that gift.

Then our Lord talked to her about the nature of worship. 'God,' he said, 'is spirit, and they that worship God must worship him in spirit and in truth' (v. 24). That is why the man or woman who has never yet experienced this gift must in the end find the worship of God falling short of full satisfaction. If I am to worship God, I must in some part understand him. I must know the way he thinks, the things he likes, so that I might have intelligent fellowship with him. I can never know God in this intimate sense until I have his spirit, so that I may worship him in spirit and according to truth.

One can illustrate this at the lower level. A man, for instance, may have a dog. Now between that man and the dog there is an area of common experience. The man likes a beefsteak maybe, and the dog likes a beefsteak. Put a beefsteak in front of a man; put a beefsteak in front of a dog, and you will get a somewhat similar reaction. But then, if you take that dog into his master's library and show him a painting by Rembrandt, the man will go into raptures over this painting. The dog will just sit there and look silly, because now you have moved into a sphere in which the dog cannot understand or follow his master, a sphere in which the dog can have no fellowship whatsoever with his master. And if you get a dog, you might discipline it to sit in front of the picture and waggle its tail, yet it will never mean anything to the dog worth meaning, because the dog does not have the man's spirit. So there are areas in which we may have fellowship with God simply as his creatures. We may admire God's artistry in a sunset, his music in the song of a bird, but when it comes to the deeper level of true spiritual worship, God, we are told, 'is spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth' (v. 24). 'Now no man knows the things of a man save the spirit of a man,' says Paul, writing to the Corinthians. 'And no one knows the things of God, save the Spirit of God' (1 Cor 2:11).

So we see again how absolutely vital it is that Christ be allowed, first of all, to give us this gift of spiritual water, this well spring welling up inside us, that not only satisfies our own thirsts and desires, but gives us the capacity for understanding and appreciating God at this

³ An essential condition; something that is absolutely necessary.

deeper and more intimate level, and so sets our hearts free to worship him meaningfully and with satisfaction.

The fifth major incident: The nobleman

The final story in this section is a story that at first sight seems to have nothing to do whatsoever with the topic of the worship and service of God. And yet, a little deeper thinking will show us that it is fitting in its place at the conclusion. It is the story of a nobleman who, when he heard that our Lord had returned from his visit to Jerusalem, came some distance to ask him to come and heal his son who was critically ill. Now this man imagined that our Lord would, at best, have to travel back for some hours with him to his home and then, entering in, have to lay his hands upon his son for his son to get well. Actually, of course, there was no need for our Lord to do anything of the sort. Standing just where he was he could pronounce the word, and immediately the son, though at considerable distance from him, would be healed. So when the man came, the Lord spoke the word, and the boy was healed. But then our Lord said to the man, 'I suppose, except you see signs of wonders, you will not believe' (4:48). You see, here was the good fellow standing on the road with Christ. Our Lord speaks the word of healing, but in the nature of things the man can have no evidence that his boy is healed except the naked word of Christ. Indeed, he cannot have any evidence for some hours afterwards, until he has made the long return journey and finds that the boy, in fact, is well.

The story is told here to emphasize the need for willingness to believe without any evidence except the naked word of Christ. This is a lesson perhaps we need to have emphasized when we are talking at this level of experimental religion, of personal experience of the power of God, of receiving this gift, the water of life, the gift of the Holy Spirit that is described as welling up, bubbling up within us (4:14). For, speaking of these things, many people will imagine that this describes rather emotional religion. Now, far be it from us to say that true religion can be experienced without any emotion. Yet it is important to see that the key to the receiving of these spiritual powers of which our Lord speaks is not to be found in emotion for its own sake. Indeed, it may well mean for the individual who sets out on this path to seek this experience of God, that he is obliged to start simply by coming to Christ, hearing his word, asking for God's gift and daring to believe that he has received this gift on no other grounds than simply this: the naked word of Christ. But if a man is willing so to come and so to receive and believe the word of Christ, he will, as the days pass, discover that the word of Christ is living and active and creative. When a man is prepared to take into his heart that living, active, creative word of Christ, he will find that he has received within him a seed that grows and brings forth its fruit with constancy and perseverance until the final harvest.

The themes of the other journeys

With this then we come to the end of this first section, which tells of our Lord's first visit to Jerusalem and his return. I have sketched in at some great length the practical application of the message of the several stories in this section, because I wanted to illustrate as well as I could that all the stories in this section are strung along on one common theme: the worship and service of God. I wanted to illustrate as fully as I could, my basic thesis that the structure

of John and the building of the individual stories into this structure, is designed to get across this particular message. The diagnosis, if it is true, will serve to bring out the message of the subsequent sections. For they record journeys that were all of them likewise made on the occasion of the Jewish festivals. The festivals differ. And if we would work this thesis out to its fullest extent, we must be prepared to observe the particular features of each of these festivals, so that we may see the background against which Christ is talking.

The second journey

On the second journey, for instance, in chapter 5, his activities and remarks are laid against the background of the Sabbath. In the events of the return in chapter 6, once more the activity of the Lord is painted against the background of the Jewish Passover, and here for instance, things are very clear. You talked of eating a Jewish Passover because it was the ritual in which eating the roast lamb was required. So in chapter 6 we read of our Lord feeding the thousands with the loaves and the fishes, and as they ate those physical loaves he talked to them of eating in a deeper and more spiritual sense, and so holds out to them the spiritual realities of the bread of life, which are only dimly illustrated in the ancient Jewish ritual of eating the Passover.

The third journey

In the third journey, affairs are described against the background of another festival, this time the Festival of Tabernacles. This is a most interesting festival, far too detailed to describe here, save only to point out that it is rather reminiscent of the past when Israel were pilgrims in the wilderness. But it was taken by the later Jewish prophets as a prophecy of the future, when Israel and the nations with her shall have reached the end of their spiritual pilgrimage and they come to the time when God makes the nations a feast of 'fat things'. I quote Isaiah's prophecy here: 'And God shall in fullness of time destroy death itself' (25:6, 8). It is in this section that our Lord Jesus presents himself as the light of the world, as distinct from the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through the wilderness. It is in this section also that he presents himself as the conqueror of death who promises to those that follow him that they shall not see death but shall have the light of life (8:12). It is in this section that he offers himself as the source of those living waters, which a man may come and drink simply by believing in him (7:37-39), in contradistinction to the waters that Moses provided for the nation in the time of their pilgrimage, by striking the rock in the wilderness.

Subsequently, our Lord stayed on, or at least was present in Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication. This was the feast in which the Israelites remembered the rededication of the altar after its desecration by that monster of impurity — Antiochus Epiphanes. It recalled a grievous time in Jewish history when the nation was split. Some of them were for accepting Antiochus and the rule of the Greeks, the Seleucid Greeks. Some of them, the more Orthodox, were for resisting the Seleucid, and the ensuing disagreement resulted in fearful bloodshed eventually, in the rise of the Maccabees. In our Lord's time, as he stood in Jerusalem in the temple at the Feast of the Rededication of the Altar, the Jews were once more faced with a similar situation in deciding if this Jesus was their true shepherd, or if he wasn't (10:22-39). To accept him as

their leader, religiously and nationally, seemed to them to be running into the danger of bringing down upon them the repressive might of the Roman Empire. It would perhaps lead them into national disaster. On the other hand, if he were really the Christ, to reject him was to reject all hope of ridding themselves from the bondage of the Gentile rulers into which they had come.

Our Lord at that stage offered his credentials to the nation to demonstrate that he was their true shepherd. He offered them the security of his sheepfold, the certainty of his leading. Yet we know they made the tragic choice of rejecting him, thinking thereby to save their nation and prevent the Roman's coming and taking away 'both their place and their nation', as some of them put it before Caiaphas (11:48). And yet, in the event, it proved a tragic, mistaken choice, for in rejecting Christ they fell victim to the zealots who eventually pushed them, all unwillingly as we know from Josephus, into insurrection against the Romans with its catastrophically disastrous results in AD 70.

The fourth journey

The final section of the book is once more laid against the background of a Passover, and here there is no doubt that John wishes us to read the work and ministry of Christ against this background. But instead of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, holding the Israelites in bondage, we read of a far more sinister figure—the prince of this world. Instead of a literal lamb being sacrificed to provide a way of deliverance, we read of our Lord. At his crucifixion we are told a bone of him was not broken. In the accounting of this, the regulation concerning the Passover Lamb in Exodus 12 is actually quoted by the evangelist (19:36). Here then, in our Lord's sacrifice, is the Passover sacrifice, which delivers men from the ultimate bondage to Satan, the prince of this world.

Summary and conclusion

Sketchily enough then I have drawn my thesis on the interpretation of the fourth Gospel. Personally, I feel it is a legitimate way into the understanding of the message of this book. Indeed, in my boldness, I fancy it is *the* way in, because it depends on and follows the structure that the evangelist himself has contrived. Whether it is so or not I must leave to your judgment, but I feel fairly confident that I may offer this suggestion to you as worthy at least of your more detailed study of the text. After all, it is fairly easy to erect a thesis if one merely takes the salient points of the evidence and neglects the detail. Whether a thesis is proved true or not depends subsequently on whether one is able in going through all the mass of detail to find that the detail, as well as the salient points, supports the thesis in question. That necessary examination of the detail is a task to which we may address ourselves in subsequent lectures in this series.

About the Author

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