

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

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This paper originated as notes for a contribution to a discussion on ***The Geometry of John's Gospel***, to follow a talk with that title given by David Bell to the Yorkshire branch of the Scientific and Medical Network, on Sept 6, 2008. I have expanded and organized the initial notes, to make a short, stand-alone piece, but its brevity means that it is more sketchy and impressionistic than I would like it to be. Nevertheless, as G K Chesterton remarked, if something is worth doing, it is worth doing badly, and few things in religion are more worthwhile than seeking deeper understanding of who Jesus was and what he taught.

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Although "geometry" and "architecture" both convey the idea of structure, I have chosen the latter term, as architecture arises from vision and function expressed as structure, and these two words seem to me to be of critical importance in understanding John's gospel. It is arguably the single most formative document of Western civilization, in that it implicitly proposes a new definition of human nature, summarized in the quotation often found outside churches, "God so loved the world that he sent his only son." The myth of a God-man come down from heaven may be outdated, and its subliminal influence on society ebbing away, but it has shaped our institutions, and the institutions of a long-gone Christendom have shaped us more than a post-Christian culture usually recognizes.

As I see it, John's gospel sets out to convey a dual vision, the first part being that the power we conventionally call "God" is not just a being that dwells above the earth but is in some intriguing way embodied in the human species. Unfortunately, in insisting that Jesus is "the only begotten son of God", the full evolutionary significance is blunted.

The second element of the vision is a new creation story, which was tacked on to the original text. The gospel has two beginnings, the original starting with "There was a man sent by God whose name was John" (1:6), which was a traditional narrative opening (just as "Once upon a time" tells us that we are about to read a fairy story). However, this was displaced by a new opening, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." We do not know who changed the text, or indeed who was the original author, but from other apparent changes it appears that there were at least two editors, usually lumped together by scholars as "the redactor".

When the first five verses that were added to John's gospel are read within the religious context of the time, they stand out as a thumbnail constitution for a new, post-Jewish religion. Any Jew would recognize "in the beginning" as the opening words of *Genesis*, the first book in the Jewish scriptures, and could not fail to see that a new theory of creation was being proposed. Seen from this perspective, the main function of the gospel is, quite clearly, to relegate Judaism to the past, even to the point of suggesting that Jesus himself rejected Judaism, which he does in various places. A secondary function is also to dispose of Gnosticism as a competitor to the

new Christian religion, which John does with a stroke by equating the Jewish concept of "Wisdom" (Sophia) with "the Word" (Logos), thus proposing that Jesus was both divine wisdom personified and the creative spiritual energy implied by the Gnostic concept of Logos.

The most obvious function of the gospel, however, is now redundant, and that was to justify a new kind of "Christianity", in opposition to the original Jewish movement, headed by Jesus's brother James, and the Jewish reform movement started by John the Baptist. To do this John had to overcome three major obstacles:

- the original Jesus movement was headed by Jesus's brother, and thus "official"
- the Baptist's type of reform Judaism was not only widely recognized, but Jesus himself had been baptized into it
- the Graeco-Roman world was not likely to accept a new religion centred on an unknown Jew who had been executed as a political dissident, and had apparently told his followers to buy swords (Luke 22:36)

Viewed in this historical context, the structure of the gospel reflects all these concerns. The overarching structure deals with the problem of preaching a Jew to non-Jews, and John achieves this by mapping the Jesus story in the form of Greek mythology, so that the Jahweh-Jesus relationship is presented like the Zeus-Apollo story. This myth tells of the highest god sending his beautiful son Apollo to earth, though not with any intention of redeeming it. Apollo, like Jesus, was taken to be the ideal male human, and was the god of poetry and music and the one who spoke through the Delphic oracle. The mythologizing had started in the synoptic gospels with virgin births, etc. but John goes much further, in making Jesus a pre-existing co-creator with the supreme God.

One can see a clear progression in the gospels, from Mark, through Matthew and Luke to John. Put briefly, in Mark and Matthew (c. 75 AD) he is an inspired prophet, a new Moses, but by the time we get to Luke (c.80 AD) and John (c. 100 AD) he has become a God-man, inspired by Greek legends.

There is, however, a critical difference between John's Jesus and the Apollo of Greek mythology, in that he is presented as a real person, and the gospel is presented as history to be read off the page, and this mixing up of history and myth is presenting serious minded Christians today with a massive problem of belief. All Christians must believe that Jesus rose again from the dead and his resuscitated body ascended into a heaven, located above the clouds, where it continues to exist, presumably breathing and talking as in life.

The historical accuracy of the gospel is a very contentious issue among scholars, but the members of the Jesus Seminar are agreed that less than 5% of the gospel of John represents what Jesus actually did and said, and the measure of their agreement on such a low figure suggests that it is a plausible estimate. That said, historical accuracy is not the only criterion by which its religious value should be judged.

The author of John's gospel is at pains to dispose of the problem of how Jesus could be superior to John the Baptist, when the other gospels report Jesus traveling to the river Jordan to undergo baptism and, presumably, join the Baptist's movement. He overcomes this historical difficulty quite simply, by inventing a big lie, which has since become history, and has John the Baptist telling the crowd that he had only come to prepare the way for Jesus, "whose shoes he was unworthy to lace." (1:25).

The problem of the Jewishness of Jesus was resolved by an equally big lie, which has had the most dreadful consequences for Jews, for they have suffered persecution for centuries as "God killers". John has Jesus call Jews "the spawn of the devil," (8:44), but what is often missed is that he is talking here to "Jews who believed in him." The significance of this lies in the fact that John's type of Christianity, which was essentially Pauline, was in a fight for supremacy, perhaps even for survival, with the original type, which was exclusively Jewish. The burning issue was can one be a follower of Jesus without being a Jew?

We can plausibly infer that John was writing for a community which contained a large number of Jewish Christians who had been banned from the synagogue, and ritually cursed, in 83 CE, for the macro-structure of the gospel, from chapters five to ten, shows a clear intent to convince them that in full-blown mythological Christianity they had something better than their native Judaism from which they were now exiled. Jesus is presented as a kind of Judaism-plus, for John tells us specifically of how Jesus makes his key speeches on Jewish feast days, and effectively offers himself as a replacement. For instance, speaking on the feast of Tabernacles, when prayers for rain were central, he puts himself forward as "the living water", and on Hanukka, the festival of light, he says he is "the light of the world."

It is surely the height of irony that Jesus himself would have been totally opposed to the Christianity of John's gospel. There can be no doubt that he would have required conversion to Judaism for anyone who wished to be a follower and circumcision for males. Such a conclusion will seem ridiculous to Christians today, and probably even non-Christians, but Jesus himself is categorical that he was "sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and to no one else" (Matt 15:24). Whatever else he was doing, he was not setting out to found a new and universal religion. When asked what was the greatest commandment, he prefaced his answer with the Shema, the great Jewish declaration of faith, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one" (Mark 12:30). This is not a footnote: it is the same definition of Jewish identity and the proclamation that the Jews made two thousand years later as they were being herded into the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

As a Jew, Jesus believed implicitly that he belonged to a race which had been chosen by God as his "peculiar treasure" (as the King James bible puts it) and which had been endowed with the land of Palestine, with the divine instruction to clear the land of its Canaanite inhabitants with genocidal ruthlessness. Notwithstanding such events, some of which are mythical, Judaism evolved to have an ethical ideal that was far above anything else in the ancient world, in sexual matters and social justice and truth-telling. In some respects, their attitude to slavery was two thousand years ahead of Samuel Wilberforce and the Abolitionists. Because of this, Judaism attracted many gentiles as associates or so-called "God-fearers". These apart, Jews conventionally recognized their moral superiority by referring to gentiles (a word which means roughly "the rest" or "ordinary humans") as pigs, dogs and sinners. The

word sinners (*hamartoloi*) is critical, but difficult to translate, for it meant not so much those who did wrong things, as those who had no sense of right or wrong – who “did not know their right hand from their left,” as Jahweh, in a humorous moment, described them to Jonah. On the first page of *Genesis* is the revealing insight that those who could distinguish good from evil would be “as Gods.” It was the Jews’ confidence that because they possessed the Law, given by Yahweh to Moses, that made them feel so humanly superior.

In Matthew and Mark Jesus refers casually to non-Jews as pigs and dogs, in much the same way that the average person in Britain would once have casually used the words “wog” or “nigger.” With a fixed image of Jesus in our mind, and largely the one created by John, we tend to read right through these references, and never ask why should Jesus tell the Syro-Phoenician woman (who is specified as a gentile) that “it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:28). What point was he trying to make? Similarly, he tells his apostles not to waste the pearls of his wisdom on the pigs (Matt 7:6). To us these are just metaphors, and the latter has come into the English language as a rather humorous piece of advice, “Don’t cast your pearls before swine.” To a Jew, however, at the time of Jesus, his words would have had a very clear significance – Jews and gentiles do not mix, and gentiles were, by definition, incapable of understanding the spiritual message of Jesus.

The broad architecture of John’s gospel is also determined by the fact that whereas the central message of Jesus in the synoptic gospels is “the kingdom of God” – which implies an end to the pagan Empire of Rome – John says nothing about this, but concentrates on elaborating on the character and role of Jesus, mostly by presenting Jesus speaking about himself, almost in a series of tableaux, the so-called “I am” passages. He proclaims, for instance, “I am the way, the truth and the life” and “I and the Father are one” and “I am the vine and you are the branches.”

It is easy at this distance in time to be critical of John for distorting history in the way that he does, and ironically it is he who proclaims that “the truth will set you free,” but then as now spiritual vision was propagated in far from ideal circumstances, and political considerations were never absent. That said, the Christian mythology which John did so much to create is not a box from which we can take the essential Jesus and fit him into a more modern and realistic box. Rather, it is a vessel into which the truth was poured and then set; it not only contains it but gives it form – the medium really is the message.

In this situation, understanding more about the historical context and structure of John’s gospel is surely a necessary preliminary to understanding more about the relevance of Jesus to the needs of our age and his evolutionary significance.