

# **BIB203 NT1 Life of Christ**

## **Unit 5 Reading**

Heard, "An Introduction to the New Testament"

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## An Introduction to the New Testament (Chapter 10: The Gospel of John)

by Richard Heard

### The Problem Presented by The Traditional Attribution to John, the Son of Zebedee

The tradition that this gospel was written by the apostle John can be traced back to the second century, but has been widely challenged during the last hundred years. Two difficulties in particular stand in the way of the acceptance of the tradition, the slowness and difficulty with which it became established, and the difference between the Synoptic and the Johannine portraits of Jesus.

Justin Martyr (c. 150-160), who had visited Ephesus, and who quotes extensively from the three synoptic gospels as from 'the memoirs of the apostles and of those who followed them', appears to show occasional knowledge of the fourth gospel, but never quotes it directly with such an introductory formula. This is particularly striking in view of Justin's statement that the Apocalypse was written by John 'one of the apostles of Christ'. The first acknowledgement that survives of John's authorship of the gospel is not from orthodox but from heretical writings of the sixties and seventies of the second century; Irenaeus (c. A.D. 185) knows of other heretics who reject the gospel. Irenaeus himself, with Theophilus of Antioch (c. A.D. 190) and the Muratorian Canon (between A.D. 170 and 200), provides the first orthodox witness to John ('the apostle' and 'the disciple of the Lord') as author of the gospel. On the other hand there seem to have been Christians at this period, nicknamed 'Alogi' (= anti-'Word' men, also -- anti-Reason men) by their opponents, who rejected the Johannine authorship of the gospel and the Apocalypse, but were not generally regarded as heretics. The terms of their protest show that at that time the gospel was generally attributed to John, although the fact that it could be openly challenged within the Church is hard to reconcile with a long-established belief in the authorship of one of the Twelve. A similar attack on both the gospel and the Apocalypse was made by Gaius, an orthodox presbyter at Rome (c. A.D. 210), whether independently or in connection with that of the 'Alogi' we do not know.

The difficulties of accounting for this comparatively late and disputed tradition are increased by the confused nature of the earliest traditions about the apostle himself. The tradition which triumphed was that John the apostle came to Asia and died at Ephesus in extreme old age during the reign of Trajan (A.D. 98-117). Against the truth of this tradition is the inexplicable silence of Ignatius (c. A.D. 110) about the apostle John in his letter to the Ephesians, where he does refer to their connection with Paul. A possible solution to many of the problems involved is provided by Papias (c. A.D. 120), who appears to distinguish between John the apostle and 'the elder John . . . a disciple of the Lord', the latter of whom was resident in Asia round about A.D. 100. Polycarp of Smyrna, who was born in or before A.D. 69, had heard John the disciple of the Lord speak in his youth, and it may well be that this elder John, who is perhaps the author of the Apocalypse was later confused with the son of Zebedee.

According to two late writers Papias stated in his second book that John and James his brother were killed by the Jews, and this tradition has been accepted by many scholars as correct; but the evidence must be considered as very doubtful, and possibly due to a misunderstanding. If the elder John, however, is really to be distinguished from the apostle, it is probable that the apostle himself never in fact came to Ephesus.

The internal evidence of the gospel also presents complex problems. In 21:24 he 'who wrote these things' is identified with 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', but apparently by another hand, and both the narratives and the discourses of the gospel raise difficulties for those who regard them as the work of the apostle John.

It is not, perhaps, surprising that the gospel should often supplement the synoptic gospels, e.g. in its description of a ministry largely conducted in Judaea and Jerusalem, and occasionally contradict them, as in placing the Cleansing of the Temple towards the beginning of the ministry (3:15 ff.), and in placing the Last Supper before the Passover (13:1 ff.). The very limitations of the synoptic gospels that have been pointed out by modern scholars make it easier to accept many of the Johannine variations as possibly resting on better tradition. There are, however, a number of features in the fourth gospel which can only be accepted as apostolic by an undue depreciation of the historical value of the Marcan framework. Thus Jesus' Messiahship is proclaimed from the beginning by John the Baptist (1:29-30), by Jesus' disciples (1:41), and by Jesus himself (e.g. 3:26); this contradicts the whole plan of the Marcan ministry. Again it is hard to understand how Mark and the other synoptists could have ignored the story of the raising of Lazarus if it was indeed, as represented in the fourth gospel (11:46 ff.), an event of such public importance as to lead to the plot of the Chief Priests against Jesus' life. Moreover some of the incidents recorded in the fourth gospel are narrated in a way that suggests, not the eyewitness account of one of the Twelve, but an inferior version to that given in the synoptic gospels. The story of the Nobleman's Son (Jn. 4:46-54), for example, appears to be a heightened version of the Healing of the Centurion's Servant (Mt. 8:5-13; Lk. 7: 1-10).

There is the same difficulty in reconciling the teaching of Jesus as given in the fourth gospel with that given in the synoptic gospels. The almost complete absence of parables is hard to account for, and while allowance must be made for the tendency of the fourth evangelist to introduce into the discourses of Jesus the fruit of his own reflections and meditations, there is a striking difference between the style in which Jesus speaks in this gospel and that of the short pithy utterances of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. At the same time there is much in the teaching of Jesus in the fourth gospel which all critics would allow to have an authentic ring.

How is this combination of such apparently authentic material and elements of doubtful value to be accounted for? Most critics would agree that it is impossible to regard the gospel in its present form as wholly the work of John, the son of Zebedee, but widely differing views are held about the circumstances in which the gospel was composed. The problem is admitted on all sides to be at once one of the most difficult and one of the most important of the historical problems in the New Testament.

### The Unity of Composition

The gospel shows a remarkable unity of style and language. Many distinctive words, phrases, and constructions occur repeatedly in the gospel and nowhere else in the New Testament except in the Johannine epistles which are probably by the same author. This unity extends to the Appendix (21) as a whole although it is disputed in the case of the last two verses (24-25). Only in the story of the Woman taken in Adultery (7: 53-8:11) are the distinctively 'Johannine' characteristics altogether lacking, and the textual evidence -- only one early Greek MS. contains the story -- as well as the way in which it breaks the close connection between ch. 7 and 8:12, make it clear that this story is a later insertion in the gospel. It has been shown, however, that there are a number of passages in the gospel where the

'Johannine' characteristics of style, although not entirely absent, are relatively scarce. (E. Schweizer, Ego Eimi, 1939 [a German work, not yet translated into English]). These passages are all narratives of a synoptic type and include the Miracle at Cana (2:1-11), the Cleansing of the Temple (2:14-16), the Healing of the Nobleman's Son (4:46-53) the Anointing at Bethany (12:1-8) and the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (12:12-15); it is at least possible that the evangelist was here using a written source or oral tradition that had become comparatively 'fixed' in form.

In a number of places the arrangement of the gospel material is perplexing; thus in chapter 5 Jesus is represented as being in Jerusalem, but in 6:1 he 'went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee'; again in 14:31 he finishes a speech with the words, 'Arise, let us go hence', but the speech is at once resumed and continues for three more chapters. If the gospel was originally written, not on a continuous roll, but -- as is now generally admitted to be possible -- in a book with pages, it would be possible to account for some transposition of passages as due to the putting together of the pages in the wrong order after some accident had happened to the book. It is probable, for example, that such a disarrangement of leaves explains differences between the Hebrew and Greek texts of Ecclesiasticus 30-36. On the other hand there is no general agreement on the subject, and many scholars prefer to accept the disarrangements of the present gospel order as due to some other cause, i.e. the use of sources, the dictation of the gospel in a number of stages, or the carelessness of the author.

Whatever sources have been employed, and whatever dislocations have disturbed the original order, the gospel bears upon it the stamp of a single mind, with a distinct and profound conception of the significance of the Incarnation. In the other gospels the authors have been primarily compilers of material, and their personal interpretation of the events of Jesus' life and of his teaching play only a subordinate part in the shaping of their material. In this gospel the historical facts of Jesus' life serve primarily to illustrate the author's main themes, and the speeches put into the mouth of Jesus are made the vehicles for the author's own interpretations of Jesus' thought. This is not to deny that there is much both in the narratives and in the discourses of the gospel which is historically true, but the element of interpretation is so great that much of the historical value of the gospel depends upon who the author was, and upon his apostolicity or his connection with an apostle. The discourses of Jesus, for example, upon Baptism (3) and upon the Eucharist (6) reflect the same fundamental conception of the significance and necessity of these two rites; that this conception was that of the evangelist is plain, e.g. from 3:16-21, where Jesus' words have passed insensibly into the evangelist's reflection upon them; if the evangelist was the son of Zebedee, it would be natural to accept his accounts as substantially correct records of incidents and discourses from Jesus' ministry, but, if he was not, a comparison with the synoptic gospels and with the teaching of Paul and others on the sacraments would suggest doubts as to the historical value of both discourses.

#### The Authorship of The Gospel

In three verses in the gospel reference is made to a personal witness of the events described. In 1:14 we read --

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth.

The interpretation of this verse, to which there is a parallel in I Jn. 1:1-2, is difficult. It is taken by some scholars as an indication that the author of the gospel was himself an eyewitness of the events of Jesus'

life, but the use of the plural seems to indicate that the author as in 21:24 and in many passages in I John, is here appealing to the corporate witness of the Church, and not to any recollection of his own.

In 29:35 a description of blood and water coming out of Jesus' side is followed by the assertion --

And he that hath seen hath borne witness, and his witness is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye also may believe.

'He' who 'knoweth' has been interpreted as a reference to Jesus himself (cf. 1 Jn. 3:5, 7, 9) and as a circumlocution for 'I', the evangelist, but the most natural interpretation is to take it as referring to the same person who has seen. In this case the evangelist is appealing to the witness of a spectator of the crucifixion, presumably the disciple whom Jesus loved who is still alive. There is nothing, however, in the passage that identifies this witness with the evangelist, and the impression that it leaves on the mind is rather of the evangelist recording something to which another, whose testimony is unimpeachable, has borne witness.

In 21:24, the story of Jesus' appearance at the sea of Tiberias and of his words to Peter and the disciple whom he loved is followed by an identification of this latter disciple --

This is the disciple which beareth witness of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his witness is true.

Three problems obscure the meaning of this verse. Many critics regard it as an addition to the gospel, made, with or without 25, by the Elders of the Church in Ephesus, to vouch for the authorship of the gospel as a whole. 'These things' can be interpreted either of the whole gospel, or of the story contained in 21. 'Wrote' is taken by some scholars as meaning 'dictated' or 'caused to be written' in an indirect sense. Where so many solutions are possible, and so much hangs on the evidence of a single verse, it is not easy to choose; but two considerations point to the verse being the work of the author himself and having a special reference to the story of the last chapter, or to a part only of the gospel. A comparison with the other two verses quoted earlier shows a striking similarity of expression between them which is most easily explicable if they come from the same pen; and while the possibility of interpolation in all three cases must be taken into account, the most reasonable explanation remains that they are the comments of the author himself. There are very great difficulties, as has been pointed out, in the way of accepting the whole of the gospel as the work of an original apostle, but much of the material in the gospel implies knowledge which only an eyewitness can have possessed.

If this view be accepted it carries with it the implication that the evangelist was not himself an apostle, but had available information from an original disciple, perhaps in written form, and that he wrote while this disciple was still alive (19:35, 21:24). The disciple is the disciple 'whom Jesus loved', and there can be little doubt that this phrase is meant to describe the apostle John, the son of Zebedee. John is not mentioned in the gospel, but the beloved disciple has a place next to Jesus at the Last Supper (13:23) and is entrusted with the care of Jesus' mother (19:27); he is a fisherman (21:2-3), and is closely associated with Peter (13:24, 20:2, 21:20). If any reliance can be placed on the narrative of Mark, the identity of such a disciple with John, the son of Zebedee, can be assumed with some confidence.

The evangelist's name we cannot know. If, as is probable, he wrote the Johannine epistles, he was 'the Elder' of 2 and 3 John. From the knowledge of Palestine which he displays in the gospel he seems to have been a bi-lingual Palestinian Jew familiar with Jerusalem. We can only guess at the circumstances in which the gospel was composed, but the evidence favours its composition in Asia Minor. The first epistle of John was known to Papias and, almost certainly, to Polycarp, and it is possible that Papias also made use of the gospel.

The date of the gospel until recently was usually placed round about A.D. 100. It is possible, however, that this date should be put back by some years. There has been discovered in Egypt a papyrus fragment of the gospel, which is dated by experts as having been written in the first half of the second century, (C. H. Roberts, *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel*, 1935.) and many modern critics have abandoned the belief that the author of the fourth gospel used the gospels of Mark and Luke in favour of the view that he drew upon a tradition similar in some respects to that behind these gospels.

We may imagine the future evangelist a member of a Christian community in Palestine, where the apostle John was well-known and some document written by John or inspired by him was in circulation. There is nothing, however, in the gospel to suggest that the evangelist was in any special sense a disciple of John, although he may have heard him speak. Perhaps as a result of the unsettlement and chaos that accompanied the Jewish rebellion against Rome the evangelist left Palestine for Asia, where he later wrote the gospel, while John was still alive in Palestine, partly from recollections of what the apostle had said or written, but largely from his wider knowledge of traditions about Jesus and his teaching, and in the light of his own interpretation of the teaching and of the significance of the facts of Jesus' life. Such a reconstruction of events is of course speculative in the extreme, but would account for some at least of the distinctive features of the gospel, as well as for Papias' statement that he 'inquired about the words of the Elders: what . . . John . . . or any other of the Lord's disciples (had said).'

#### The Sources of The Gospel

To distinguish sources in a work whose author writes in such a distinctive and interpretative style is an almost hopeless task. Even to delimit with any accuracy those parts of the gospel where the influence of the apostle John is most likely is extremely difficult. The place in the gospel where such an influence seems most evident is the narrative of the Last Supper, the Trials, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. Here the repeated references to the disciple whom Jesus loved, and the many indications of special knowledge, e.g. 13:3 ff., 21 ff., 18:10, 15 ff., 26, 28, 19:25 ff., 34 f., 21:2, 15 ff., imply a dependence upon an apostolic source. But the evangelist, who may well no longer have had access in Asia to whatever document John wrote, has clearly shaped his material even here, possibly with the help of other traditional material available to him.

It is clear that the evangelist was able to draw upon such traditional material in the narrative parts of his gospel, and it is probable that most of this information he had already learnt in Palestine. He knows for example that John was baptising at Bethany beyond Jordan (1:28) and later at Aenon near to Salim (3:23), that Andrew and Peter, like Philip, came from Bethsaida (1:44), and he links two healings with the pool of Bethesda (5:2) and the pool of Siloam (9:7) respectively. It was only in Palestinian tradition that such detailed localisation of events would be of general interest and importance.

Even where his narratives are closely parallel to those in Mark and Luke it is possible to explain the verbal similarities by the dependence on a Palestinian tradition which had become largely stereotyped in form. Thus the phrase in the healing at Bethesda, 'Arise, take up thy bed, and walk' (5:8) is very close to Mk. 2:9, and the result is described in the next verses in very similar words to those used in Mk. 2:12, but such verbal similarities are to be expected in oral tradition, and can be found in other places where literary dependence is unlikely (cf. Lk. 14:3-4a with Mk. 3:4).

In two places the parallelism of the fourth gospel with Mark is of special interest and importance. In John 6 a series of events is narrated -- the Feeding of the Five Thousand, the Journey across the Lake, the Walking on the Water, the Demand for a Sign, and a Controversy with the Jews -- in an order and in language reminiscent of that of both Mark's parallel cycles (6:30-8:26). It has been argued that the fourth evangelist is indebted to both accounts, which appear to be variants of the same tradition, and that he must therefore have found them already combined in Mark. It seems more probable, however, that he is dependent on another version of the same events, which gives at least one piece of valuable additional information (cf. Jn. 6:15), and that he is here reproducing, perhaps from memory, a tradition which he has learnt in Palestine. The Anointing in Jn. 12:1-8 is also very close verbally to that in Mk. 14:3-9, and in a lesser degree to that of Lk. 7:36-39. Both John and Mark use the rare phrase 'pistic nard', the meaning of which is uncertain, and agree in giving the value of the ointment at (Mk. more than) 300 pence, and the language of their versions is at times very similar (cf. Jn. 12:7-8 with Mk. 14:6-8). John also shows remarkable similarities with Luke, e.g. in the anointing of the feet, and the woman wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. Yet to say that in this one place in his gospel the fourth evangelist was careful to compare Mark and Luke and adopt phrases from each, while at the same time making important changes in the story on his own account, is to solve the problem by creating even greater difficulties. It is simpler and perhaps more reasonable to assume that here, too, John is drawing on the oral Palestinian tradition from which both Mark and Luke probably derived their accounts.

There are other passages in the fourth gospel where a similar dependence is visible upon Palestinian tradition also employed by Luke. John knows of Mary and Martha (11:1, 5, etc.) but what he has to tell of them is very different from Luke's isolated account (Lk. 10:38 ff.); John and Luke agree in many details of the Passion and Resurrection, e.g. Jn. 13:2, Lk. 22:3, John 13:38, Lk. 22:34, Jn. 18:10, Lk. 22:50, Jn. 19:41, Lk. 23:53, Jn. 20:12, Lk. 24:4, but they also differ widely in their accounts, as would be natural if they both drew much of their material from the tradition of different communities at different times.

The case for the fourth evangelist's use of other gospels must be considered not proven. One argument, however, remains in its favour. How did the fourth evangelist come to write a 'gospel' which preserves substantially the same shape as that of Mark if he had not himself read Mark. It is possible that he had heard of the existence of Mark's gospel without ever having seen it himself, or that he hit independently on a similar literary form which preserved the structure of some earlier oral form of 'Life of Jesus' but it must be admitted that the problem remains.

If the task of distinguishing the narrative sources of the fourth gospel is beset with difficulties, that of disentangling from the discourses sayings which come from the apostle, sayings which come from tradition, and the evangelist's own meditations, is even more difficult -- and often quite impossible.

The gospel does in fact contain a considerable number of sayings which find parallels in the synoptic gospels, and which must rest on good tradition, some of them perhaps on apostolic witness, e.g. 5:47 (cf. Lk. 16:31), 13:16 and 15:20 (cf. Mt. 10:24, Lk. 6:40), 15:14 (cf. Mk. 3:35). To these may be added many of the short aphoristic sayings, which have no close parallel in the other gospels, but are in accord with their general account of Jesus' teaching, e.g. 2:19, 3:3, 4:48, 8:51, 9:41, 13:35.

If the apostle is ultimately responsible for some of the narrative material concerned with the Passion, it may be that some of the sayings in this part of the gospel come from him, especially those which are connected with the questions of apostles, e.g. 12:23 f., 14:2-11, 21-23. But the editorial work of the evangelist in 12-14 is so manifest that little can be built on this.

Some scholars would defend the substantial authenticity of many continuous sections of the discourse, e.g. in the 'rabbinical' arguments 7:15-24, 8:16-19, 10:24-38, but for the most part the discourses must be considered as artificially built up around genuine words of Jesus, in an attempt to give what the evangelist considered a right interpretation of some aspect of his teaching as a whole.

### The Value of The Gospel

It is on the value of these interpretations of the evangelist that much of the value of the gospel depends. That the gospel has preserved details of great historical worth in its narrative is certain, and although its framework supplements rather than replaces that of Mark, it makes plain much of what is obscure in Mark and the other gospels. The account of the ministry in Judaea and Jerusalem is particularly valuable here. At the same time the tradition on which the evangelist relies is at times defective, e.g. in his account of John the Baptist, and the placing of the Temple-cleansing at the beginning of the ministry.

The miracles recorded in the gospel follow the same general pattern as in the synoptic gospels, although the tendency of the evangelist to use them as a peg for a controversy or discourse introduces a further artificial element into his gospel. There are parallels in the synoptic gospels to the Healing of the Nobleman's Son (4:46-54, cf. the Centurion's Servant, Mt. 8:5-10, Lk. 7:1-10), the Feeding of the Five Thousand (6:4-13, cf. Mk. 6:35-43, 8:1-9 and parallels), and the Healings of the Impotent Man and of the Blind Man (5:2-9, 9:1-7; the synoptic parallels are here not so close), and the fourth evangelist appears to be drawing on a tradition similar to that used by Mark and Luke. In all these stories there is probably a sub-stratum of truth, but the pointing of the moral in Jn. 5:10-47, 6:26-58, 9:8-41 appears to be the evangelist's own interpretation of the events.

In the story of the Raising of Lazarus the problem becomes even more acute. The miracle itself may come from tradition, as the Turning of the Water into Wine at Cana (2:1-11) probably does, although neither miracle is recorded in the synoptic gospels. Yet in neither case is it easy to accept the miracle as based on a true happening, and the peculiar significance attached to the Raising of Lazarus in the gospel would seem to be at least in large part built up from the imagination of the evangelist himself.

The conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman betray a similar incongruity. Nicodemus is told of the necessity of baptism with the spirit (3:5) at a time when the spirit was not yet given (7:39), and Jesus' open declaration of his Messiahship to the Samaritan Woman (4:26) is in conflict with Mark's account of his refusal to avow himself as the Christ in the early stages of his ministry. Both these discourses, and possibly their settings, appear to be constructed by the evangelist as a means of giving his interpretation of Jesus' teaching on Rebirth and the Universality of the Religion of the Spirit.



In assessing the value of the evangelist's interpretations of Jesus' teaching it is necessary to take into account three influences which have been united in the evangelist's mind, the sayings of Jesus as he received them, the interpretations of Jesus' relationship to God and of his teaching which were known to the evangelist through apostolic and early Christian tradition, and the influence which was exerted upon his mind by the acquaintance with Jewish, and particularly Hellenistic Jewish thought of the period. It is the fusion of these three elements in his representation of Jesus' life and teaching that makes it a matter of the greatest difficulty to distinguish in any particular discourse between what rests upon a deep understanding of the true meaning of Jesus' actual words and what is read into them in the light both of experience and of preconceived ideas as what the Word of God should fittingly proclaim.

It is possible to say that much of what the gospel says about Jesus' filial consciousness is interpretation built upon a few sayings of Jesus (e.g. Mt. 11:27, Lk. 10:22), but Christian tradition from the earliest period has accepted the essential truth of this. In his representation of Jesus' teaching on Eternal Life and on Judgement the fourth evangelist disagrees with much of the teaching of the primitive Church and even with some of the teachings ascribed to Jesus in the synoptic gospels, but that his account is based on a fuller understanding of the real teaching of Jesus seems clear. The sacramental teaching of the gospel, on the other hand, while much of it certainly reflects the experience of early Christians, seems, in comparison with the rest of the New Testament evidence, to be only partially based on the teaching of the Jesus of history. The interpretation given of Jesus as the Logos in the Prologue is confessedly interpretation, and interpretation influenced by the intellectual thought of Hellenistic Judaism, but at the same time one justified by the belief of the Church in Jesus' Sonship.

As a historical document the fourth gospel will always be differently assessed by different scholars. As an interpretation of the meaning of the gospel story it will always have a special and inestimable value of its own.