

# NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

## *Lesson 11*

### Gospel of John – Part One

#### I. BACKGROUND

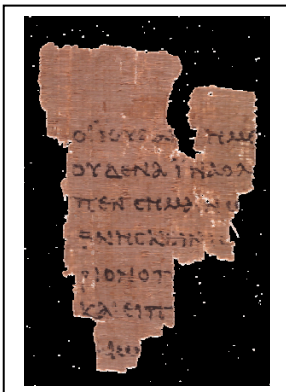
John? As in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Didn't we cover Mark last week? What happened to Luke? Why are we skipping to John?

Well, we have covered Matthew and Mark.<sup>1</sup> We have not covered Luke. We are going “out of order” because Luke and Acts were written as two parts of a whole. By dealing with John first, we will then be able to cover Luke and Acts together, rather than separating them by a long period covering John.

*Who wrote John? When?*

Tradition holds that the apostle John wrote the book of John toward the end of his life while living in Ephesus. This tradition dates back to the late 100's in the writings of a number of the church fathers. Multiple fathers from 150 into the 200's reference John having written a gospel or use and refer/quote from the gospel itself.

Most conservative scholars seem to date the gospel around 85–90, when John would have been advanced in age, but still in control of his memory and mental faculties. We have an actual fragment of a copy of the gospel that dates from about 120–130. This fragment is called the “John Rylands fragment” after the museum in Manchester, England where the fragment is found today.



This small fragment is less than 3 ½ inches tall. On one side, it has part of John 18:31-33 and on the other side verses 37-38. The fragment was originally discovered in Egypt and is confidently dated in the first half of the second century. It is the earliest known fragment of the New Testament.



<sup>1</sup> We have yet to cover the textual problems of where Mark's gospel ended and whether a good bit of Mark 16 was in the original gospel. We expect to cover that point when we reach similar textual questions about a portion of the Gospel of John.

*What is the purpose of the gospel? Who was it written to?*

The gospel of John explains its purpose in John 20:31. This verse in the New International Version reads, “These [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

A more accurate translation that gives the proper English understanding of the present tense verb “believe” is a bit awkward, but it would read, “These [signs] are written that you may maintain your belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” The thrust of the verb tense is NOT that the gospel was written to lead unsaved people to faith (although it can certainly do so!). Rather, the core purpose of the original writing was to confirm believers in their faith.

The believers who received John’s gospel would certainly have included the church at Ephesus (modern Turkey), where history teaches us that John was an elder. The gospel must have quickly had a wide circulation seeing that it was in use in Egypt within 30 to 40 years of its likely date of origination.

The gospel is written in ways that convey ideas and teachings to those acquainted with core ideas of Greek philosophy. The gospel, however, also contains too many Jewish allusions and touch-points to be considered written exclusively for a Greek mindset. Ultimately, we see in the gospel an intricate book that teaches and draws upon the ideas and vocabulary of Jew and Gentile alike. This makes sense in the perspective that the book was written as a late gospel to cover all aspects of a developed church.

*Why isn’t this gospel a “synoptic?”*

We have been covering the synoptic gospels. This is the one New Testament gospel not included as a “synoptic” gospel. John often tells different stories from the life of Jesus than the synoptics. Similarly, John gives details and insight that the others do not. On the other hand, the synoptics contain a good bit of material that is completely absent from John.

Because of John’s late authorship, many consider John to have been well acquainted with the synoptics at the time of his writing. There was no need for John to rehash what had already been set forth. John was in a place to

write from his historical recollection of things not covered by those gospels already in circulation.

*What is unique about this gospel?*

John occupies a unique position as a gospel that not merely recounts the stories of Christ, but also places them into a theological context. This gospel was not written primarily to “first generation believers,” *i.e.*, to those who lived at the time of Christ. Instead, this gospel primarily targeted second and third generation Christians. These people would have been the children and grandchildren of the contemporaries of Jesus.

In that vein, we see in John great significance beyond the factual recitation of the ministry of Jesus. John places the ministry into a much broader context of who Jesus was, why Jesus came, the nature of the sacrifice and resurrection, man’s need for salvation, the role of the Holy Spirit, *etc.* For this reason, many consider John the “Theological Gospel.”

John also has a number of words and phrases that are staples in his writing. John uses the word “believe” 98 times in the gospel (more than any other word). “Belief” is the central theme of the gospel. Also, John repeatedly uses the words “witness,” “love,” “abide,” “the Father,” “the Son,” “the counselor,” “light,” “life,” “darkness,” “Word,” “glorify,” “true,” “real,” and others. We will examine a number of the occurrences of these words as we examine this gospel.

## **II. GREEK AND JEWISH GLANCE AT THE GOSPEL’S THEOLOGY**

### **A. Greek**

The gospel begins “In the beginning was the word [*logos*] and the word [*logos*] was with God and the word [*logos*] was God.” The concept of *logos*, or “word,” was well developed in cultural Greek thought. In fact, in the city of Ephesus, where John served as Elder of the church, a Greek philosopher named Heraclitus had lived over 500 years earlier. Heraclitus was a big influence on Plato and others who followed him. Plato seized on Heraclitus’s teaching that things are constantly in a state of flux or change. In *Crytylus* 402A, Plato wrote:

Heraclitus, you know, says that everything moves on and that nothing is at rest; and, comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says you could not step into the same river twice.

The reasoning behind this statement is that the river is moving and flowing, and that the second time you step into it the water will be different; the river constantly changes.

Yet, for Heraclitus, there was also a constant in the universe. There was one cohesive force that held all together. To the extent that every thing changed, there was a constant in the very rule that every thing changes! It was this constant unifying force that Heraclitus termed *logos*, or “word.” It should be added here that *logos* also means “reason,” “law,” “ratio,” and other terms of logic and precision.

Into this world of thought, John writes of the *logos* in the first chapter of his gospel. Understood in the context of Greek philosophy, “in the beginning” (before anything else) was this constant – the *logos* – the unifying force of nature. This constant, this *logos*, was with God (*i.e.*, separate from God yet coexistent with God) and this unifying constant was God (*i.e.*, while separate and coexistent, yet God as well). This thought would comport quite well with Greek philosophy. The idea of a constant force in the midst of an ever-changing world was consistent with the Greek idea of deity.

The shock to the Greek thought world would come in verse 14 of chapter one where John writes, “And the word [*logos*] became flesh and dwelt among us.” The ripples of this profundity on the Greek thought system are many! For starters, it would be an incredible event in itself that the reason behind the universe, the only constant in a world of change, the divine principle that holds all things together, the *logos*, entered into this world as a person. Further, the idea that the constant became a part of the ever changing (the incarnation) was a Greek miracle on the same level as the Judeo-Christian concept of the incarnation – Jesus as fully man and fully divine.

Yet, this is true. This is a world of constant change. Nothing stays the same. Space and time are constantly moving. In the midst of this movement, there is something that does hold all things together. There is something that is a constant. There is logic and reason that is consistent even as we claim that everything changes. For in fact, EVERYTHING changes, and that fact never changes! This is our God and Lord. In God, we find the reason and force that cements

and explains the forcers of life. In Jesus, we see God on earth; the constant and pure walking among the evolving and changing.

## B. *Hebrew*

In the genius that unfolds as the Gospel of John, consider the same verses in the Hebrew mindset, for it is no less profound. Moreover, we will see the same verse and the same words conveying the same thought and theology in the Hebrew mindset, yet using an entirely different background and approach.

The Tanach, the Hebrew scriptures begins with the Torah, the Hebrew law known as the first five books of the Old Testament. The first, of course, is Genesis. The Hebrew bible begins with “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis one continues to explain how God did so. God created all things by speaking them into existence. God *said*, “Let there be light.” God *said*, “Let us make man.”

It was the word of God that brought all things into existence. It was the word of God that gave structure and meaning to the world as we know it. It was the word of God spoken and expressed in the beginning.

We should also point out that the very first words in the Hebrew bible as translated into the Greek and used at the time of John’s gospel, were the very same words that John starts his gospel with “In the beginning...” No Hebrew could have read John’s gospel and not understood that John was echoing Genesis and the word God used to bring forth life and meaning on this world.

Now, we look at the shock to the Hebrew mindset that came in verse 14 of chapter one. John writes that the “Word” (think Hebrew here – God’s creative expression from Genesis) became flesh and dwelt among us. The English phrase “dwelt among us” is a heavily loaded phrase to the Hebrews. The Greek word John uses is *paraskeneo*, which literally means “to pitch one’s tent beside.” The word is used in the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures at the time of John in Exodus where it speaks of the tabernacle being pitched among the Hebrews as the place where God would descend and commune with Moses.

What John is telling us in the Hebrew mindset is that the creative force and being that was separate from God and yet a part of God, the “word,” came and tabernacled among men. This harkened back to the great deliverance of God for his people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. God’s dwelling with the people and his communion with them through Moses was a prototype – a foreshadowing. The greatest event of all was found later, when the word became flesh and pitched its tent and dwelt here among us all.

*C. Conclusion*

We see here John is indeed about more than a mere chronology of the events around the life of Jesus. John is setting out, in exquisite language and thought, on multiple levels and to multiple cultures, the reality of Jesus the Christ, the incarnate word of God, and the very core of all that exists. Those teachings seek us out and communicate eternal truths to us. Those are the teachings to both the Greek and Hebrew mindset. Those are the teachings we will explore in the weeks ahead.

### **III. POINTS FOR HOME**

1. There is a constant in our world of change.
2. He has a name – Jesus.
3. He sought us out and came to us.
4. He came as man, though he is divine.
5. He came for a reason.
6. You can Behold His Glory