

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John (SB_JN_Introduction – Part 2)

The Synoptic “Problem” & The Distinctive Nature of John’s Gospel

As we observed in Part 1 of this introduction, the Gospel of John is very unique and distinct from the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Gospels were not intended to be biographies for as John states in the final verse of his account “there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). It has been estimated that if all the words spoken by Jesus and recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke were read aloud, it would take about three hours.¹ When compared to a three to four year public ministry, three hours is a fairly small fragment of all that was spoken by Jesus.

Each Gospel records certain parables, miracles and other events of Jesus. Some scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel recorded and it served as the basis for Matthew’s account written in the late 50’s to early 60’s A.D. Others believe that Matthew’s Gospel was written first. The reason for the conclusion that the Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel is that Mark contains only 7 percent unique material, whereas 93 percent of Mark can be found in Matthew and Luke. Some have even speculated that there was a third document upon which Matthew and Luke relied and which may account for about 200 of the verses that the two Gospels have in common. However, if such a document existed, it would have most likely been held in high regard by the early church and preserved at least in subsequent transmissions.²

The Gospel of Mark follows an outline closely associated with Peter’s preaching in Acts 10:36-43. As we have seen, John was a co-worker with Peter in the Jerusalem church.³ Peter and John (along with James) were considered pillars in the Jerusalem church (Acts 3:1-4:23; 8:14; 12:1-2 cf. Gal. 2:9). It is interesting that these three men were also the only men present at the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1-13) and they are considered to be Jesus’ inner circle of disciples during His earthly ministry.⁴ As we have also seen, Luke was written as a historical research project by the physician Luke in the early to mid-60’s. Most conservative scholars agree that the Synoptic Gospel writers made use of various sources. For instance, the genealogical records of both Matthew and Luke may have resulted from temple records or oral tradition. Luke indicates that many had written the facts concerning the Lord Jesus (Lk 1:1).

During the period from Pentecost until the apostle Paul received and began communicating the “mystery” doctrines of the Church Age (Eph 3; Col 1:24-26) which are contained in his epistles, there developed a core of apostolic teaching (Acts 2:42). No doubt Peter, James and John as pillars of the Jerusalem church were at the center of this teaching.

¹ Edwin A. Blum, “John” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 268.

² Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., “Matthew” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 13-14.

³ Apparently Mark was an early co-worker with Paul even though Mark was still involved in the early Jerusalem church – Acts 12:12; 13:13; 15:37-39; Col 4:10-11; 1 Pe 5:13; Philm 24. Therefore, this is one piece of evidence that indicates that the contents of Mark’s Gospel (written in the late 50’s to early 60’s A.D.) would have been known to John.

⁴ Neither Luke nor Mark were among the 12 disciples of Jesus during His public ministry.

Also, evidently this teaching was focused upon proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah Who was crucified in accordance with the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 2:22-39, 47; 3:12-26; 4:11-12; 5:31; 7:1-53; 8:12, 30-40, etc.) and built upon Jesus' previous instructions to the apostles regarding spiritual preparation for the kingdom (Acts 3:19; 8:12 cf. Matt 28:18-20; Lk 24:44; Acts 1:3-8; 2:14-21).

Very early, the group of male believers in Jerusalem grew to about 5,000 (Acts 4:4). Prior to Paul's receipt of the "mystery" doctrines of the Church Age, the early apostles had no other additional revelation from God to communicate to the world and were only focused upon fulfilling Jesus' commands to them (e.g. Matt 28:20). This necessitated the outpouring of temporary spiritual gifts and accompanying miraculous displays by the apostles in order to validate their message to a skeptical and heavily Jewish audience. John, the son of Zebedee and writer of the Fourth Gospel, would have been one of the primary communicators of this early, post-Pentecost theology. Perhaps John, like Peter, would have found Paul's later doctrines hard to grasp (2 Pe 3:15-16).

Perhaps this helps us understand and better appreciate the cross-dispensational-like emphasis⁵ upon the spiritual aspects of the believer's existence in both the Gospel of John and the Apokalupsis or Revelation. This is especially significant given:

- ❑ the unique nature of John's writings;
- ❑ the fact that John wrote from a perspective that was decades removed from Jesus' earthly ministry, the Pentecost event and even Paul's ministry; and
- ❑ that apart from Paul, John's writings represent the most significant record of direct revelation from God in the New Testament.

High-Level Outline

- ❑ Prologue (1:1-18)
- ❑ Book of Signs (1:19 – 12:50)
- ❑ Farewell Instructions (chapters 13-17)
- ❑ Passion and Resurrection (chapters 18-20)
- ❑ Epilogue (chapter 21)

⁵ By "cross-dispensational", I am referring to the fact that much of John's writing either reflects spiritual principles that are apparently common to both the Church Age and the Messianic Kingdom Age (e.g. the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers) or it spans dispensations (e.g. the churches of the book of Revelation 1-3 compared to prophetic revelation regarding the Tribulation, Second Advent, duration of the Messianic kingdom, and the events at the end of human history). No other writer of Scripture had as complete a dispensational perspective as did John by the A.D. 90's when he penned the Gospel, his three epistles (1-3 John) and the Apokalupsis or Revelation. He was the beneficiary of Jesus' teaching, Peter's ministry, Paul's ministry and his own unique, direct revelation from God. No other writer was so equipped with a cross-dispensational perspective that would have enabled him to synthesize the spiritual dimensions that inter-connect believers of all dispensations. Examples include his emphasis upon Jesus' teaching regarding the coming Holy Spirit (Jn 14:15-24 and 16:1-15); his emphasis upon love and fellowship among the brethren (Jn 13:31-35; 15:9-17; 1 Jn 5-7; 2:1-11, 28-29); and the residence of believers in eternity future (Re 21:1-22:5). To me, this is what makes John's Gospel distinct, i.e. the influence of his historical perspective by the end of the 1st Century A.D.