

The Most Jewish Gospel?

Dwight A. Pryor

THOUGH LAST IN New Testament sequence, the Fourth Gospel surely holds first place in the hearts and minds of most Christians.

Of all the gospels, John's is the most read, cherished and oft-cited. If a single book of the Bible is to be distributed in pamphlet or tract form, invariably it will be the Gospel of John. If any verse of the Bible is more memorized than John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world ..." – it is hard to imagine what it would be.

The Fourth Gospel is a literary masterpiece and a theological *tour de force*. Its profound and unambiguous identification of Jesus of Nazareth with the eternal Word of God incarnate in space and time has informed Christian theology from the earliest centuries.

At a more down-to-earth level, John's storytelling has inspired readers in every generation. His stories have brisk pace matched with a clarity that is always compelling.

We don't easily forget for example Jesus' encounter at night with a devout spiritual leader in Israel named Nicodemus; or his mysterious action of writing in the dust when confronted by men intent on punishing a woman caught in adultery; or the risen Lord's encounter with a distraught Mary Magdalene in a garden, next to an empty tomb, and his puzzling retort to her, "Don't touch me."

The Fourth Gospel holds keen interest for scholars as well. Indeed a veritable revolution in Johannine studies has occurred in recent decades – a sweeping reassessment supported in no small measure by the historic discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the fertile Jewish and Christian scholarship that sprang therefrom.

Classic Christian scholarship has viewed John's gospel as being a late work (second-third centuries) that reflects a thoroughly Hellenized (Greek philosophical) worldview. In marked contrast, the Fourth Gospel today is widely held to be a first-century composition that is indelibly Hebraic in character and composition.

John's theology, archeology and spirituality are quite at home within the diverse but vibrant mix of Second Temple Judaism. One need not look to the West and the "sons of Greece" for interpretative keys to the Fourth Gospel; they better are to be found in the hands of the "sons of Zion" and Jewish hermeneutics.

One distinguished scholar, noted for his work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, goes so far as to claim that the Gospel of John is the "most Jewish of all the gospels." That conclusion probably overstates the evidence, but what is abundantly clear now is that the Fourth Gospel is in fact a Jewish document written to a Jewish audience using Hebraic categories of thought and subtle Hebraic literary techniques.

ONE NOTABLE EXAMPLE of John's Jewish worldview is found in the pre-eminence he gives to God as Father and his persistent subordination of the Son to the Father. This pattern is not always recognized by Christian readers, who tend to focus on John's

celebrated high Christology. Indeed his magisterial evocations of Genesis in his opening verses identify Jesus of Nazareth as the creative Word that "*became flesh and dwelt among us*" and whose glory is that of the "*beloved only Son from the Father*" (1:14).

However, John's recurring theme of the Son being sent of the Father inherently subordinates the Son. The Father has ultimate authority and He sends the Son. The Son is the Sent One in a relationship of complete dependence upon the Father, characterized by trust, obedience and love. There is complete unity and yet complete dependence of the Son upon the Father.

The Son depends upon the Father for his power (5:19; 17:2); his mission (7:28-29); his instructions (14:31); his teaching (7:16); his disciples (6:37); his judgments (8:16); his authority (17:2); his glory (17:24); the gift of the Spirit (3:34) and other gifts (17:7); and for his very life (5:26). Jesus identifies his Father as the "only, true God" (17:3), to whom he prays (17:15), and for whom he always does that which is pleasing (4:39). God has bestowed upon the Son His name – the "*name which is above every name*" (Philippians 2:9) – but Jesus is Lord "*to the glory of God the Father*" (2:11).

The Fourth Gospel reveals the Son to show us the Father. Jesus is our Mentor of what it means to live the fullness of a life to the glory of the living and true God.

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Dwight A. Pryor

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