THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

Frederick Houk Borsch
Early tradition venerated the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, as the author of what is often known as The Fourth Gospel because of its place in the Bible after the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This John, whom tradition also identified with "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (see John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2-8; 21:7), was thought to be the author of the three Letters of John and the Book of Revelation as well. Most scholars, and many other readers, find both variations and similarities in these writings that suggest they come from different authors but perhaps from the same or similar Johannine communities of faith. The Gospel appears to be the result of a rather lengthy process of controversy, inspiration, meditation, and reflection on earlier traditions about Jesus that may well reach back to the Apostle John and/or "the beloved disciple." It is suggested that the Gospel’s final composition took place toward the end of the first century, perhaps in or near Ephesus.

The purpose of the Gospel, put forward in 20:31, is to strengthen faith in Jesus as
the Christ and Son of God. Hearers and readers soon notice how differently the Fourth Gospel does this in comparison with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. One is struck by the absence of familiar parables, pithy sayings, the beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer. The kingdom of God is rarely mentioned, and Jesus’ baptism and casting out of demons are not presented. Jesus’ public ministry, during which time he makes several trips to Jerusalem, seems to last more like three years instead of one. The expulsion of the moneychangers from the temple comes at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in John’s Gospel. The crucifixion takes place on the day of the Preparation of Passover, when the paschal lamb is being slaughtered, rather than on the Passover Sabbath itself. One finds, on the other hand, lengthy teachings by Jesus on the meaning of his presence in the world and his ministry. Some traditions are shared with the other Gospels, such as the role of John the Baptist, the feeding of the five thousand (followed immediately by the walking on the water), and, of course, the passion narrative, but they are told somewhat differently with details not found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Like the other Gospels, the Fourth Gospel
has healings of a blind man and a paralytic, but again, there are numerous variations and different emphases. Only in John’s Gospel do we find the stories of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, of the woman at the well, and the turning of the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. There is no narrative of the institution of the Last Supper in John, but there is the story of the foot washing and teaching about the bread of life come down from heaven and Jesus’ giving his flesh to eat and blood to drink.

What one most notices, however, is a different tenor and perspective. Matthew, Mark, and Luke have their distinctive ways of presenting the significance of Jesus, but in John’s Gospel we are told at the outset that this is the one who was with God from the beginning. He is the Word of God, and, in a series of striking figures and images, Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and the one who gives living water. “I am,” he tells his disciples, “the light of the world, the bread of life, the vine, the shepherd, and the door.” “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6). To the woman of Samaria who says, “I know that the Messiah is coming,” Jesus responds, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you”
(4:25-26). The evangelist may have had a series of “I am” utterances on which he drew in composing the Gospel. At their core is Jesus’ witness “before Abraham was, I am” (8:58), reminding hearers of the Bible of God’s response to Moses from the burning bush, “Tell the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14).

John is no less insistent than the other Gospels that Jesus was a human being who lived in history. He refutes anyone who would maintain that Jesus only appeared to be human: “The Word became flesh” (1:14). But Jesus in this Gospel speaks and acts as one who also is of the divine realm. There is a kind of supernal light always around him. One is meant to see him, as it were, stereoscopically—at once human and divine. Or, to switch the figure, he is to be heard stereophonically—speaking both as the human Jesus of history and as the Jesus who the disciples now know to be the risen one. Researchers of the Gospel might want to take off the stereophones and listen first to one voice and then the other. But John will not let them. The Gospel presents Jesus as both human and of God. This is the only way to understand all he truly was and is. His was, indeed, a real human life, and
these were real events. But one must hear and see beyond them to realize their full significance.

**Life in Him**

The first eighteen verses form what is often called the *prologue* to this Gospel. Apart from the obvious prose insertions of verses 6-8 and 15 regarding the ministry of John the forerunner, much of the thought and wording of this passage is believed to have come from an earlier poem about God’s Wisdom or Word (in Greek *Logos*). *Logos* played a significant role in both Greek philosophy (as the mind or intelligence of God became immanent in the rationality, order and harmony of the universe) and in Jewish thought and speculative reflection on the activity of God’s Word and its role in creation. (See Genesis 1 and Psalm 33:6-9.) If the evangelist made use of such a poem, he, and perhaps his tradition before him, has infiltrated and adapted it for the story about Jesus as the Word of God. At another level of meaning hearers of the Gospel can regard Jesus as the one who not only spoke the Word of God but also enacted and embodied (*enfleshed*) it in human life.
Except for the word Logos or Word itself, many of the images and themes of the prologue will echo and be developed throughout the Gospel: light, darkness, life, truth, world, born, blood, flesh. The passage is also tough and demanding, forged not just in the heart and head of a poet and theologian, but among people with different understandings and beliefs. Light struggles with darkness, acceptance with non-acceptance. There are questions about who John is and who is Jesus. Believers are not born of the will of the flesh, but believe in the Word becomes flesh. The world does not know him, but he has made known in the world the unseen God. Hearers are being asked what they believe about this witness.

Because it is poetic language, the passage presents powerful ideas that are not easy to pin down, especially in a Gospel that will use double-meanings and even deliberate misunderstandings of words to advance its themes and make hearers ponder and probe for deeper meanings. The first words “In the beginning” are an obvious allusion to the first words of the Bible in the creation story of Genesis 1. The Greek word for beginning can also, however, have the sense of first cause and can mean ruler, authority
and domain as well. With slightly different significance we can translate in verses 3 and 4: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people," or, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." Whatever the nuance, we are to understand that the Logos, become the incarnate in Jesus, was and is God's life-giving creativity.

The Fourth Gospel does not have a birth narrative. Perhaps the evangelist did not want to think in terms of a particular moment when the Word became incarnate. Instead, he focuses on the great theological truth that the Word that was with God, through whom all things came into being, "became flesh and lived among us." In this flesh we have seen "his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:14). "From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (1:16). The grace that came through the law of Moses has been fulfilled. Jesus does this as a new Moses in this Gospel. The Son, who has made known the God whom no one has ever seen, has added his new grace and truth.
Signs of Life

After Jesus turns water into wine at the wedding at Cana, we learn (2:11) that this was "the first of his signs." When he heals an official's son, we hear that "this was the second sign that Jesus did..." (4:54). Understandably, hearers might get the idea that the Gospel will soon tell us of signs three, four, and more. The evangelist, however, is more subtle than this. He has started hearers counting and now wants them to keep track as he uses a total of seven signs (perhaps drawn from a collection of such stories) to move forward the action and thought of chapters two through eleven. The third sign is the healing of the paralytic at a pool called Bethzatha or Bethesda (5:2-18). The fourth is the feeding of the five thousand (6:2-14), followed by Jesus' walking on the water (6:16-21). The miracles seem to grow greater and greater as the sixth (9:1-41) is the healing of a man born blind, leading then to the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44).

Each of the miracles is a sign pointing to deeper spiritual truth and is full of symbolic significance for Jesus' ministry and the work of salvation. Even the number seven,
hearers of the time would have recognized, has important meaning. In seven days God created the world so that seven was regarded as a number especially associated with the divine activity and God’s plan for all the world. The evangelist’s design also gestures beyond seven to a new day and the greatest miracle of all. In an irony in which this Gospel revels the raising of Lazarus from the dead will be seen as a reason for the putting to death of the one who raises to new life. But Jesus’ death, in turn, will lead to the eighth and greatest miracle: Jesus’ rising from the dead and opening the way to eternal life for all.

Each of the sign narratives, along with other stories such as the conversation with Nicodemus about being “born from above/born anew” (3:1-21), the meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well (4:5-42), and Jesus’ visit to the temple during the festival of Booths (7:10-52), is a cause for controversy and often extensive teaching about Jesus’ mission and ministry. In many of these circumstances the conflict and controversy is with “the Jews,” a generic term referring to religious officials of the time and others opposed to Jesus. Modern hearers and readers of this Gospel must be careful
to recognize the historical character of this terminology that, of course, does not have any reference to Jewish people beyond the initial circumstances.

**The Way, the Truth, the Life**

With the stories of Jesus being anointed by Mary (12:3-8), the entrance into Jerusalem (12:12-19), and the washing of the disciples feet at the Last Supper (13:1-20), chapters twelve and thirteen begin to point to Jesus' passion and death. When he speaks of being "lifted up from the earth...to indicate the kind of death he was to die" (13:32-33), he signifies not only being lifted up on the cross but his lifting up by resurrection and exaltation to heaven. Similarly, the glorification of Jesus as the Son of Man (13:31-32) signifies both the glory of his sacrificial death and of his risen life.

These teachings lead to chapters fourteen through seventeen—Jesus' final discourse and prayer with his disciples. The disciples do not understand where he is going: "How then," asks Thomas (who will later not believe in the resurrection until he sees the mark of the nails and feels Jesus' wounded side), "can we know the way?" (14:5).
In words that sum up so much of the teaching of this Gospel, Jesus tells him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). In response to Phillip’s request to “show us the Father” (14:8), disciples learn that “I am in the Father and the Father in me” (14:11). As the prologue (1:18) had promised, “the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, has made him known.”

The discourse goes on to tell of the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son and the promised coming of the Spirit, the Advocate, “whom I will send to you from the Father” (16:26). Into this relationship of love the disciples are invited to participate “that they may be one, as we are one” (17:11). Although they remain “in the world” of mortal life and sin (the world that God yet loves so much that God “gave his only son,” 3:16), they no longer “belong to the world” that is separated from God (17:14-15). The disciples, who are the branches, may now abide in Jesus, who is the true vine, and he in them (15:1-6). Whatever they ask of the Father will be done for them in this abiding relationship of love. They are given the commandment to “love one another as I have loved you” (15:12; 13:34). The commandment comes from the
Father’s Son, the one who is prepared to “lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:12-17).

The Spirit that the Father will send in Jesus’ name is the promised gift to the disciples. The Gospel sees this promise as Jesus’ renewed presence through the Spirit after his resurrection. “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you” (14:18). “When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all truth . . . and will take what is mine and declare it to you” (16:13, 15). All that Jesus has taught will be brought to mind and renewed by this Spirit who, one may understand, is speaking even now through Jesus in these chapters.

Passion, Death, and New Life

“What is truth?” The Fourth Gospel presents many of the stories of Jesus’ passion and crucifixion familiar from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is the betrayal by Judas, Peter’s denial, the trials before the high priest and Pilate, and the picture of Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha where he is crucified between two others with the inscription “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” on his cross.
This Gospel adds distinctive material, such as the name of the high priest’s slave whose ear Peter cuts off and Jesus’ telling his mother and the disciple whom he loved, “Woman, here is your son” and “here is your mother.” Blood and water come from Jesus’ side when, already dead, he is pierced with a spear. We hear of Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus coming to carry his body away for burial. Perhaps it is the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus that most distinguishes the passion narrative in the Fourth Gospel. The troubled Pilate, suspecting that Jesus is more than the falsely accused victim brought before him, tries to get some idea of the nature of Jesus’ kingship. But, finally, as a representative of all the secular powers of the world, he gives up with cynical words that echo in this Gospel and down through the believing centuries: “What is truth?” (18:38).

John’s resurrection stories feature the moving picture of Mary recognizing her risen Lord as he says her name. We hear of Thomas’ disbelief until Jesus, still bearing his wounds, appears before him. “My Lord and my God,” proclaims Thomas (20: 28), the first disciple and representative of all
disciples who will acclaim Jesus’ lordship and divinity.

The stories of the miraculous catch of fish and the risen Lord having breakfast on the shore of Lake Galilee as he gives his disciples bread and fish occur in the final chapter. They, along with Jesus telling Simon Peter to tend and feed my sheep and the last command to “follow me” (while Peter hears that the disciple whom Jesus loved may “remain until I come”) could well have been appended at a later time. They were likely added to a version of the Gospel that once ended with the words “these are written so that you may come to believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). Perhaps, as the next to last verse of chapter twenty-one may suggest, the tradition of these stories came from the beloved disciple. This richly spiritual and theological Gospel then concludes with the awareness that there were many other stories of what Jesus did: “If everyone of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25).
Frederick Houk Borsch is the retired Bishop of Los Angeles. He formerly taught at Princeton University, where he was Dean of the Chapel, and at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, where he was Dean and President. He is presently serving as the Interim Dean of the Berkley Divinity School at Yale.