

THE CHRIST OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

John 1-6

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A series of 12 articles published in "Search" magazine

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No 1. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF JOHN'S VIEW

An enigmatic Gospel?

The gospel of John is different from the other three gospels in a number of ways and some Christian writers have found it to be something of an enigma. They have gone as far as to say that the attitudes shown and words used by the Lord in John could not have come from the Person portrayed in the other Gospels. This is somewhat extreme but there are certainly major differences in the Lord's approach to His message in the fourth Gospel.

The format of the Gospel

The first three gospels give us a synopsis of the life of the Lord, highlighting important areas but John is extremely limited in the material he uses. He does not mention anything of the Lord's early life, and our first introduction to Him is in the calling of His disciples, after His baptism. Also, he does not record such important events as the temptation of the Lord, His transfiguration (although he was there!) or the last supper. On the other hand he gives us new incidents such as the visit of Nicodemus, the raising of Lazarus and the washing of the disciples' feet.

The Gospel is built round eight "signs" (in contrast with the "miraculous wonders" as they are described in the first three gospels). The signs are interspersed with discourses by the Lord and dialogues with the hostile Jews and in places John adds his own explanations. For example in the third chapter, we cannot tell where the Lord's words to Nicodemus end and John's explanations begin.

Yet there is no doubt that John does not limit his material because of a lack of knowledge of the Lord and His work. He was one of the first of the twelve to be called and he was one of the inner group along with Peter and James who were privy to much of the Lord's activity (e.g. the transfiguration - Matthew 17) which even the rest of the disciples did not see. His knowledge was much more intimate and first hand than that of Mark or Luke. John's version of incidents mentioned in the other gospels often contains little personal touches that show that the account was written by an eyewitness. For example, in the feeding of the five thousand it is only John who tells us that it was Philip who was asked about the possibility of buying food for the multitude, that Andrew produced the loaves and fishes and that it was a small boy who carried them.

The purpose of the Gospel writers

The purpose of the first three gospel writers is different from that of John. Luke introduces his gospel thus:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

This synoptic format is also used by Matthew and Mark, but John's purpose is much narrower than giving an orderly account of "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). In John 20:30-31, he declares his reason for writing:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these 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.

The synoptic gospels are primarily connected with the proclamation of the kingdom of God (or kingdom of the heavens), whereas in John the emphasis is on "eternal life" or simply "life" and how that may be attained.

As John says, this is his purpose in writing. Life is offered to those who "believe in" the Lord Jesus, and the evidence that points us to faith is contained in the signs. It is therefore important for us to consider these signs and the dialogues connected with them, for John has deliberately included certain events and excluded others. The purpose mentioned in 20:31 underlies every incident, every word spoken by the Lord and others, every description of events and all explanatory comments made by John himself.

John's view of Jesus

Eusebius says that John began his gospel with an account of the deity of Jesus, because this task had been reserved for him by the divine Spirit. Jerome says that John was urged by the churches of Asia to write "more profoundly about the deity of the Saviour, and, so to speak, to break through to the very Word of God."

Certainly the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ shines out even more clearly in John's Gospel than in the others. Jesus' claim to be Messiah is much more explicit (e.g. John 4:26) than in the synoptic gospels where it is implied rather than stated and the Lord seems reluctant to declare Himself and refuses to permit unclean spirits, His disciples and people He heals to declare His identity. If we are trying to answer the allegation that Jesus never claimed to be God and that this view was erroneously read into His teaching by His hearers, it is to John's gospel that we usually turn for confirmation of the Lord's view of Himself.

Throughout John's Gospel the Lord is constantly portrayed as being the Son of God, completely in control of every situation. In chapter 5 He reveals the identity of His will to that of His Father, and depicts Himself and His Father working in harmony to achieve the purpose of God. As the Son of God He has complete understanding of all men (e.g. 6:64). Even at the end of His earthly life the majesty of His presence is complete. John does not record the Lord's earnest prayer for the departure of the "cup" from Him (Matthew 26:38-39). Instead we read in John 18:11:

Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?

We are also told of the fearful reaction of those who came to arrest Him (John 18:6). At His trial John also records the fear of Pilate in the presence of Christ (19:8).

Yet this one is also very human. He is in subjection to His Father's will at all times. He feels tiredness and thirst (John 4:6-7) and it is because of His humanity as well as His deity that He was able to be

the perfect sacrifice for sins.

We are given greater insight into the words and character of the Lord in John's Gospel. Jesus speaks in long soliloquies (e.g. after the feeding of the five thousand) which have no parallel in the synoptics.

The words spoken by the Lord also have a different flavour to those reported in the first three gospels. The parables and illustrations from nature with their burning applications are entirely absent. Instead the Lord engages in long, complex philosophical discourses about Himself and His relationship with His Father and His followers.

A distinctive view of Christ

There is no doubt that the insight John gives us into the character of the Lord is unique, both as to His earthly life and His eternal greatness. This series of articles will seek to examine some aspects of Jesus which are revealed by John and may help us to learn more of the nature of our living Lord.

No 2 THE WORD

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1)

In this way John opens his gospel, and introduces us to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word. What are we to make of this term? John offers us no explanation of it, so we can infer that it was known to his readers and that his usage of it would be in line with their understanding. The problem for us, 2000 years on, is to know what that was.

"Word" is the Greek LOGOS, but it is not often used in the New Testament as a description of the Lord. John repeats it in 1:14, describing the Lord's earthly life. In Revelation 19:13 the glorified Lord, returning to the earth, is given this title. These references give us no clue as to the meaning of the word and there are no other references to help us.

The meaning of logos

There are a number of meanings of the word in Greek and these can be conveniently summed up under two headings :

- (i) Thought, and the outward expression of that thought
- (ii) Speech, and a method of communication

The spoken word is the outward expression of the thought processes of the mind and, in common Greek, it was used to describe any type of self-expression. So with John, the Word was God's method of expressing Himself to man and also His means of communication to man.

The Jewish background to logos

Logos is used often in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It describes the Word of God in action, for example in Psalm 33:6 :

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made.

To the Jew the logos was dynamic and alive. In Jeremiah 23:29 we read :

"Is not my word like fire" declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces ?".

But also the Word of God is the message of the prophets. Jeremiah 1:4 says :

The word of the Lord came to me, saying...

Both creation and revelation are prominent in John's Gospel. In the first chapter he stresses the extent of the involvement of the Lord Jesus in creation :

Through him all things were made ; without him nothing was made that has been made

(John 1:2)

Then in verse 18 of the same chapter, he shows us the Lord Jesus Christ as the expression of the Father :

No one has seen God, but God the only (Son) who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

This theme is taken up by the Lord Himself when He speaks to Philip :

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father" ?
Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me ?...It is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.(John 14:9-10)

The Word and Wisdom

To gain a better understanding of what the Jews would understand by logos we must also consider the Hebrew concept of Wisdom. There is an obvious connection between the Mind of God and the Wisdom of God and in the Old Testament the Wisdom of God appears to have adopted a personality of its own. In Proverbs 8 the speaker is Wisdom itself :

...when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was the craftsman at his side. (Proverbs 8:29-30)

Here we see one of several parallels between the attributes given to Wisdom in the Old Testament and the Wisdom books and those given to the Word in John's writings - e.g. wisdom is the active power in creation. The tendency to personalise Wisdom is continued in the Torah, the rabbinic writings on the Law. It was not difficult for John to apply these concepts to the Logos and, in so doing, to strike a chord in the heart of his Jewish readers.

Much of John's terminology (e.g. the contrasts between light and darkness) have a Jewish rather than a Gentile source. When the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in Qumran, they showed that a group of Jews were using such ideas. Nevertheless the word Logos was used extensively in non-Jewish writings.

The Gentile background to logos

The Philosophers who placed the logos at the heart of their thinking were the Stoics. The logos has been described as "the rational principle of the universe and reason in man". To the Stoics, the logos controlled the world, giving order where there would otherwise have been chaos. Further the logos was also involved in creation and in giving life and understanding to man.

Before the Stoics, Heraclitus had taught that the universe was in a state of flux but was also held together in tension, thus making it dependable. The power that accomplished this was the logos.

The fusion of Jewish and Greek ideas

Philo, a Jew living in Alexandria about the time of Christ, sought to bring together Hebrew religion and Greek thought. His aim, according to W R Inge in "Christian Mysticism" was to "reconcile religion with philosophy - in other words Moses and Plato". In doing this Philo mentions the word logos some 1300 times in his writings. To Philo the logos stood between God and man, bringing together the unknowable spirit world and the material world where man dwelled. Philo says :

"The Father, who has begotten all things, granted as His choicest privilege to his chief messenger and most august logos that he should stand in the middle between the Creator and the created". ("Who is the Heir of Divine Things" p205)

This of course has a resemblance to Paul's teaching of the Lord Jesus as the One Mediator in 1 Timothy.

So by the time John wrote there was a considerable wealth of literature on the subject of logos, both Jewish and Greek, and the term would be familiar to both types of readers. However John's influence is primarily Jewish and he uses logos as a means of translating their ideas into Christian terms. John's doctrine of the Lord Jesus as the logos goes further than any non-Christian writer.

John's ideas of the logos

In John 1:14 we have the revolutionary statement that :

The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us

This goes far beyond the teaching of any other writer. Philo's idea of God is of pure Being. In fact he does not even connect the logos with the Messianic hope of Israel. He has no concept of the Word becoming flesh. To the Stoics also the logos was an abstract force, rather than a person. John's teaching, built on the Old Testament usage of the term, was that the Lord Jesus Christ was God's expression of Himself to man and at the same time God's vehicle for action in the earth - creating, sustaining and supporting the universe. Paul reaches the same conclusion in Colossians 1:15-17:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created...all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.

The Lord Jesus, the Word, is the One Who reveals God to man through the creation, through the message of the Old Testament prophets and through the incarnation. He is the consummation of all that the prophets foretold. On the road to Emmaus He met with some of His disciples :

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:27)

The tragedy was that the Jews, who should have recognised Him, did not receive Him.

To his readers John reveals that the Lord Jesus is the answer to their quest. Great intellectuals had striven to understand their existence. They had gone so far as to realise that there was a Power Who

held the universe in balance and gave meaning and significance to life on earth. But they had not gone far enough. How could they without divine revelation? The mind, the reason and the word of God had become a human person, thus revealing God to us in a way that had never been seen before or since.

The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only (Son) who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14)

No 3 THE WORD IN ACTION

The Word in creation

In the first three verses of the gospel, John introduces the Lord as "The Word" and links this title with the activity of Creation

In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was God...Through him all things were made
(John 1:1-3)

The Genesis account of the six day creation makes it clear that the work was accomplished by the spoken word of God :

And God said "Let there be light" and there was light...And God said "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water..." (Genesis 1:3,6)

Only in the first chapter of his gospel does John describe the Lord Jesus as the Word of God. However, in many instances great significance is attached to the spoken word of Christ. John emphasises the fact that the words were not from Jesus but from God Himself. For example in John 12:49 we read :

For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.

The same point is also made in John 8:26 and 3:34. The Lord Jesus **was** the Word of God, but He also came to **speak** the Word of God. He did not speak on His own behalf. The words of Jesus are the words of God and their power is devastating. This power appears in a number of ways :

1. The power to convince by argument and knowledge

After the Lord's encounter with the woman at the well, she and her neighbours were convinced of the Lord's identity by what He **said** rather than by His actions :

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did"...And because of His words many more became believers (John 4:39,41)

2. The power to heal

In chapter 4 we read of the nobleman who came to Jesus to plead for his son. The Lord healed him by the spoken word, without seeing the patient.

The father realised that this (the time the fever left the boy) was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him "Your son will live". So he and all his household believed. (John 4:53)

The healing of the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda was also accomplished by the spoken word of Christ (John 5:8). It even had the power to raise the dead, as the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11

shows.

In the beginning the Word of God created the heavens and the earth. They were created perfect but became spoiled by sin - leading to decay and death. But God was showing that His Word still had power to **restore** the creation, overcoming disease and death.

3. The power to give eternal life

Lazarus had been restored to his natural life so he would ultimately die. Jesus' words can accomplish even more than this. They can give **eternal** life. The twelve disciples realised this. When the Lord's teaching was hard to understand and even harder to put into practice many of His followers grumbled about this. Some even abandoned the Lord and walked no more with Him.

"You do not want to leave, too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered Him
"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:67-68)

To those who will listen and believe, the words of the Lord lead to eternal life. In John 5:24-25 the Lord says :

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

4. The power to sanctify

The Word of God has a continuing effect on the life of the believer. Not only does it show us the way to eternal life, it also has a cleansing effect on an ongoing basis. In His wonderful illustration of the relationship of the Christian to Himself, as a branch to a vine, Jesus shows the continuing effect of His word

...every branch that does bear fruit he (the Father) trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. (John 15:2-3)

But it is essential that His words remain in us if we are to continue to bear fruit. Jesus continues :

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourself to be my disciples. (verses 7-8)

But the word of the Lord is powerful in other directions also. It has power to divide. The writer to the Hebrews describes the written word of God as "sharper than any double-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). In those who will not believe it prompts a different reaction :

5. The power to cause hostility

The Pharisees were proud that they were the children of Abraham, but the Lord pointed out that they were not the true children of Abraham since they rejected Him.

I know you are Abraham's descendents. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word...He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God. (John 8:37,47)

Jesus was accusing the Pharisees of trying to kill Him because of the effect His Word was having. He was speaking the word of His Father and by rejecting His word, they were rejecting the One Who had sent Him. But the power of the Word of Christ does more than cause opposition.

6. The power to condemn

As the Jewish leaders continued in their unbelief, the Lord emphasised again the necessity for His hearers to heed His words. In John 5:22 He reveals that the Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son. In chapter 12 the Lord shows how this judgment is to be accomplished. He Himself had not come to condemn men. Those who did not hear Him would be condemned, however, by the very words He had spoken.

There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.(John 12:48)

What is our reaction ?

It is impossible to remain neutral to the Word of God. It provokes a reaction in all who face up to it. To those who obey it leads to eternal life. To those who reject, it leads to condemnation. What is our reaction ? As James says :

Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (James 1:22)

No 4 CHRIST IN THE PROLOGUE

The first 18 verses of John's Gospel form an introduction to the Lord Jesus Christ and His work. Some of the ideas considered there are taken up later in the book and further developed. Here John introduces his main themes. First, we see the concept of the Lord Jesus as the Word of God, which has been considered in an earlier article.

There are, however, other themes which also are enlarged upon as the book progresses and this article will look briefly at them. This study is by no means exhaustive for a full study of all John's themes would take more space than is available in this magazine.

Jesus as the source of life

(i) Self-sustaining life

In him was life, and that life was the light of men (John 1:4)

The life of the Lord Jesus Christ was no ordinary human life. It gave illumination to men. This life, being the life of God, is completely self-sustaining. In John 5:26 the Lord says :

For as the Father has life in himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in himself.

(ii) The gift of life to men

Earlier, in verse 21 of chapter 5 He says :

Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.

The Lord's life is delegated from Father to Son and from Him to men. John states in 20:31 that the purpose of his writing is that :

You may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

As one would expect, this granting of life is very important. When He spoke to the religious leader Nicodemus, the Lord introduced the topic of the necessity for new life :

I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
(John 3:3)

Nicodemus (and we) must be born agains. We require new life, and that life is Christ's life. In 5:24 the Lord shows that this life comes from His spoken Word :

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned...I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

The sign that is arguably the greatest demonstration of Himself as the source of life is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The Lord said to Martha :

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

God the Father has granted authority to the Son to give this life to all those He chooses. He is the resurrection and the life. Believing on Him will grant us this life, and His spoken word will raise the dead at the last day to life incorruptible.

(iii) Life imparted by the death of Christ

The theme of believing on the Lord Jesus is intimately connected with His death. In chapter 3, John uses the beautiful analogy of the brass snake held up on a pole by Moses in the wilderness :

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (verses 14-16)

The Lord Jesus was lifted up on a cross as the means of giving us life. In chapter 10, the Lord compares Himself to the good shepherd, laying down His life for the sheep, in order to give them life.

I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:10,11,15)

There is another description of the Lord Jesus given by John in the prologue to his gospel which is linked very much with life.

Jesus as the source of light

...that was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it...The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (John 1:4,5,9)

John the Baptist described himself as one sent to bear witness to the light. It was he who first pointed men to Jesus as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29)

(i) Light and darkness

Light and darkness are very important in John's Gospel. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He came out of the darkness into the Lord's light. Judas, by contrast, "went out. And it was night." (John 13:30).

When the Lord was speaking to Nicodemas, He made reference to the contrast between light and darkness :

Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. (John 3:19-21)

The light of God, that was Christ, had come into the world to show God's ways and to reveal the sin and evil in the world for what it truly was. But men preferred the darkness because of the evil of their hearts.

(ii) The Feast of Tabernacles

At this feast in Jerusalem, the city would have been full of light. The Israelites had been guided by a pillar of fire in the sky as they came out of Egypt and the commemorated this by lighting a golden candelabra. These would be all over the city of Jerusalem. It is against this backdrop that Jesus made His famous pronouncement :

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12)

Again the Lord contrasts light with darkness and links it with life.

The message was extremely urgent. The Light was only going to be with them for a short time :

You are going to have the Light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it so that you may become sons of light. (John 12:35-36)

When this light is transferred to others by the Lord Jesus, they become sons of light. As He said to His disciples, "You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14) The Lord's light and life are conferred on His followers.

The Lord Jesus is the light of the world, revealing the true situation between God and man, but the idea of light is linked not only with illumination; it involves life and truth.

Jesus as the source of truth

We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth...For the law was given through Moses ; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1;14,17)

In this gospel we have the fullest revelation of God through Christ in His earthly ministry, and truth is a recurring theme.

(i) God is truth

I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. (John 14:6-7)

The Lord presented Himself as the truth, and at the same time says that, in seeing Him, we see His Father. Later, in several places, He describes the Holy Spirit as the "Spirit of Truth", for example in 16:13 He says :

When He, the Spirit of Truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth.

There is always a unity between Father, Son and Spirit. They are all characterised by truth in their very essence. The Lord came to reveal His Father and His truth, and after He had departed, the Holy Spirit would carry on the work.

(ii) Truth in Christ is liberating

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. (John 8:32)

The experience of being exposed to the truth of God in Christ can set us free to see ourselves and our situation clearly and determine what issues of life are important. A failure to respond to the Lord's proclamation shows that men are not on the side of truth. As He said to Pilate :

For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me. (John 18:37)

When the Lord spoke to the Jewish leaders in chapter 8 He made it clear that their failure to respond to the truth of His message proved that they were not on the side of truth. Instead, they were the sons of their father the devil, the father of lies.

You belong to your father, the devil and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me !...He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God. (John 8:44-47)

Whose sons are we ?

John reveals the Lord Jesus here as the Life. He has the life of God which is completely self-existent and He is willing to pass this on to us if we have faith in Him and His work for us on the cross. We can partake of God's life in Christ and become sons of God. If we neglect to do this we will perish.

He also reveals the Lord as the Light. He is the light of the world, and His light may shine in our hearts so that we, too, may become the sons of light, shining in the world. If we neglect to do this we

will walk in darkness.

Finally the Lord is revealed as the Truth. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all Truth. All who love the truth respond to Him. If we neglect to do this we show who our real father is - the father of lies.

Whose sons are we ?

N0 5 THE PERSONALITY OF JESUS - AN INTRODUCTION

The testimony of the disciples

Towards the end of his gospel John reveals the purpose of his writings :

These (miraculous 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 (John 20:32)

It is important that we bear John's aim in mind when considering his writings, as we will then marvel at the skill with which he presents the Lord in the light of these purposes. In the first chapter we meet several people and John records their reactions to the Lord Jesus, each time confirming the information that he is seeking to give his readers - that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. No one can read the first chapter of the Gospel without being impressed by the character who is presented to them there.

The testimony of John the Baptist

After the dramatic prologue to the gospel, John the Baptist gives his testimony in verse 15 :

John testifies concerning Him. He cries out, saying "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.""

His words are further amplified by the writer of the gospel in verses 17 and 18 :

For the law was given through Moses ; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the only (Son) who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

John the Baptist had testified to the pre-existence of the Lord Jesus Christ and John the writer was now explaining that this One who is now at the side of His Father in heaven, had come to reveal His Father "full of grace and truth" (verse 14)

John freely confessed that he was not the Christ. He was merely the forerunner and his function was to "make straight the way for the Lord" (verse 23). John now knew who his preparation work had been for, as he pointed Him out the next day :

The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said "A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me" (verses 29-30)

John, it transpires, had realised who the Lord was after His baptism, when he saw the Spirit descend in the form of a dove. He had been told that the man on whom he saw the Spirit come down and remain was He who would baptise with the Holy Spirit. This testimony is confirmed in verses 35 and 36 :

The next day John was there with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said

"Look, the Lamb of God".

A large part of the first chapter is taken up with John the Baptist but there is very little mention of him thereafter. Three times in the first chapter we read of John giving testimony:

- verse 15 : The surpassing greatness and pre-existence of Christ
- verse 19 : John's own role as a forerunner and the worth of the One standing among them.
- verse 32 : The confirmation by the Holy Spirit of the identity of this One.

The testimony of Andrew

Andrew was one of the two disciples of John who heard him point Jesus out as the Lamb of God. He and his colleague followed Jesus and spent the day with Him (verse 39). We are not told what was said in their conversation, but Andrew was undoubtedly convinced by what he heard :

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ) (verse 41).

Simon was then introduced to the Lord and renamed Cephas. He also had no doubt that Andrew's verdict was correct.

The testimony of Philip

In verse 43, we read of the calling of Philip. John relates the incident very briefly and no doubt omits many of the details. We have no record of Philip having met the Lord before, or of having had any previous discussions with Him, though we are told that Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was a native of Bethsaida. Jesus called Philip to follow Him and Philip immediately did so. Philip also was sure of Jesus' identity :

Philip found Nathanael and told him "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph." (verse 45)

The prophets of the Old Testament had predicted the coming of the Messiah of Israel, the Son of David, who would reign forever on the throne of His Father, and deliver Israel from her enemies. Towards the end of his life Moses said that the Lord had told him:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers ; I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him" (Deut 18:18)

The testimony of Nathanael

Nathanael was naturally sceptical, especially when he heard that Jesus came from Nazareth, but when he met the Lord and was told that the Lord had already known him when he was under the fig tree, he was convinced, as the other disciples had been :

Rabbi, you are the Son of God ; you are the King of Israel (verse 49)

Again the conclusion hardly seems justified from the information given to us and we are left with the feeling that John does not record the whole of the conversation. But in this case Jesus, too, seems to gently mock the haste with which Nathanael proclaims His deity :

You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that (verse 50).

Nathanael did not have long to wait to see "greater things".

The miracle of Cana

Jesus' first miracle was the changing of the water into wine, which took place at the marriage in Cana and is the first of the eight "signs" recorded by John in his gospel. The details of the incident are well known but we must note the unostentatious way in which Jesus performed the miracle. The sign seems to be primarily for the disciples and it appears that the only people who knew anything out of the ordinary had taken place were the servants. The master of the banquet, certainly, thought that there had been a mistake in that the best wine had been left to the last - an ironic touch. But the closing remarks by John himself are the most important.

This, the first of His miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed His glory, and His disciples put their faith in Him (John 2:11).

What kind of man was this ?

As we are introduced to the Lord Jesus we see a man with an extraordinary personality. The Israelites had long been awaiting their Messiah and now in a very short space of time the son of a carpenter from Nazareth convinces John the Baptist, Andrew and his companion Peter, Philip and Nathanael, who had no time for Nazarenes, that He was the One sent from God. Yet, so far, Jesus had done no miracle, unless His insight into the character of Nathanael can be so interpreted. We have no record of any teaching, and His public ministry had not begun. The miracle at Cana served to confirm the faith of the disciples rather than establish it. What sort of personality did He have to produce this effect on His contacts ?

We cannot read the chapter without being impressed by the character set before us. Here was an exceptional man, worthy of further investigation. But He was more than man. He was the Son of God, the King of Israel, the One about whom the prophets had written. The nature of the Lord Jesus is thus brought sharply into focus, and in the rest of the gospel John builds this up by revealing more of Him.

No 6 THE MIRACLE AT CANA - JOHN 2:1-11

The connection with the previous narrative

In the second half of the first chapter of his gospel John shows us the interaction between several individuals and the Lord Jesus Christ. These encounters all took place within a short time scale and are linked with the recurring phrase "the next day" (verses 29, 35, and 43). At the close of His encounter with Nathanael, the Lord promised him that "you shall see greater things than that".

The incident of the turning of the water into wine follows immediately "on the third day" (2:1), and is a speedy fulfilment of the Lord's words.

The significance of the incident

(i) The first miracle.

John specifically states that this was "the first of his miraculous signs" (2:11) and it is very important. Jesus' aim was to show Himself as Israel's Messiah and king. His identity was instantly recognised by Nathanael in 1:49:

Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.

It had been promised that Messiah would come to usher in His kingdom and in the Old Testament the Messianic kingdom is described by the picture of an abundant supply of wine. For example in Amos we read:

New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from the hills. I will bring back my exiled people Israel...they will plant vineyards and drink their wine. (Amos 9:13-14)

By turning the water into wine, the Lord reminded the Jews of this vision of the future, and demonstrated His own leading role in it.

(ii) The symbolism of the water pots

Of greater significance is the fact that the water on which the Lord performed the miracle was held in the stone jars used by the Jews for ceremonial washing. The water was there for purification under Jewish custom and represents the whole of the ceremonial law which was replaced by the Lord Jesus Christ with something much better - a situation where there was no need of continual cleansing because of the efficacy of His one sacrifice.

Yet there is a real sense in which the era introduced by the Lord came from the old order. He was there, as He said, not to destroy the law but to fulfil it and His function was to take the Jewish system and carry it forward to its logical conclusion. He was the One to which all the Old Testament writings looked forward as the fulfiller of Israel's aspirations to a land and a kingdom ruled by God Himself through the Son of David on His throne. Jesus had come to bring the kingdom of heaven

to men. So He took the water of the old order and transformed it into the wine of the new.

The relationship of the Lord with His mother.

The Lord's mother was also present at the wedding and it is her conversation with Him which seems to prompt His action. In verse 3 we read that:

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.'

Many reasons have been suggested for her remark. Perhaps she was involved in the administration of the wedding - which would explain her orders to the servants and her knowledge of the fact that the wine was finished when apparently not even the master of the banquet knew this. Perhaps it was the arrival of the Lord and His disciples at the feast which had precipitated the crisis and she was blaming Him for it. Perhaps she just knew that He could be depended on to solve problems. Whatever the reason, the Lord was not encouraging in His response:

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come." (verse 4).

This reply is not as cold and dismissive as it appears in English. Jesus used the same term to address His mother from the cross in John 19:26 and at Cana she certainly did not infer a refusal to help.

"My time" must refer to the correct moment to act. The Lord Jesus always acted independently of the promptings of others. The correct time for Him to act was when it was His Father's will to do so and He always waited for the appropriate moment.

His response to His mother did not indicate that He intended to do nothing and then had a change of mind. His actions were independent of man and awaited His Father's timing. We see a similar response by the Lord in John 7 when His brothers urged Him to go up to the feast at Jerusalem. He refused to go with them but subsequently went up alone halfway through the feast.

Also in John 11, when He heard that His friend Lazarus was sick He stayed where he was for a further two days, to the surprise of Martha and Mary.

The style of the miracle

John introduced the Lord Jesus Christ as "The Word" in the first chapter of the gospel. This title was familiar to both his Jewish and Gentile readers. Similarly the sign of turning water into wine would strike a common chord. We have already noted that the idea of an abundance of wine was a picture used of the coming kingdom on earth. Gentile readers would be aware that the god Dionysus was supposed to have changed water into wine and archaeological evidence has revealed that "miracles" of this nature were a recurring feature in temples to his honour. But there the similarity with heathen religion ends. The style in which the Lord Jesus did His work had no trace of the ostentation of a miracle performed to impress the great mass of the people. The sign was performed quietly and it appears that only the servants who were involved in the drawing of the water and Jesus' disciples knew of the source of the wine.

The reason for the sign.

The sign of the turning of water into wine would appear to be for the benefit of the disciples. John rounds off the incident, as he often does, with a comment:

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. (verse 11)

In the first chapter we read of the calling of some of the disciples. Their awareness of the identity of the Lord was growing. John says in 1:14

The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

By performing this sign so early in His relationship with His disciples, He revealed His glory to them. Their faith was thus strengthened and they were more able to face the troubles that lay ahead.

No 7 THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE - JOHN 2:12-25

After His first sign in Cana, the Lord Jesus went to Capernaum with His family for a few days and at the time of Passover, went up to Jerusalem. John links the ensuing cleansing of the Temple with the preceding events and we are left with the impression that it happened only a short time after the changing of the water into wine. The incident is not a sign and there is nothing miraculous about it but it is important as it shows the Lord's first conflict with the Jews.

How many cleansings ?

John records this incident as if it occurred very early in the Lord's ministry. In Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-18 and Luke 19:45-46 a similar incident is mentioned, but it takes place at the Passover immediately prior to the crucifixion. Is it the same incident relocated by John for theological reasons, as some have suggested? Or did the Lord cleanse the temple twice, at the start and end of His ministry?

When we compare the account given in the synoptic gospels with John's record, there are differences between the incidents.

(i) In the synoptics, the Lord objects to the dishonesty of the traders. For example in Mark 11:17 He says:

My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations but you have made it a den of robbers.

Similar wording appears in Matthew 21:13 and Luke 19:46. In John, the whole practice of trading in the temple courts is condemned:

Get these out of here ! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market ! (John 2:16)

(ii) The response of the Jews in the two accounts is also different. Matthew and Luke record no response but in Mark we read:

The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. (Mark 11:18)

This certainly does not suggest the start of His ministry. Rather, it is the catalyst which sets in motion the events leading to His betrayal and trial.

In John, however, the reaction is much milder.

Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" (John 2:18)

The reaction of the Jews in seeking a sign was not wrong in itself since Messiah was expected to provide signs as credentials of his identity. However the Lord never produced signs on demand. His whole ministry was full of signs. They were there for those who wished to see.

It would therefore appear that there were two cleansings of the temple.

The actions of Messiah

The claims of the Lord Jesus for Himself were apparent to the Jews. There was no doubt who He was declaring Himself to be. His words as He drove out the moneychangers and traders demonstrate this. He refers to "my Father's house", not "our Father's house". John does not indicate any reaction of the Jews to this wording though it is clear elsewhere that they regarded this (rightly) as a claim to be divine. (See John 10:24-39)

The actions of Jesus had been foretold in the Old Testament.

See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? (Malachi 3:1-2)

John the Baptist had just claimed to be such a messenger. Now the Lord, in His first visit to Jerusalem recorded by John, was coming suddenly to His temple in judgement against the evil practices He found there. So the Lord's actions in this chapter are further confirmation of His claim to be Messiah.

Zeal for your house

As the disciples watched the Lord clearing the temple, John tells us that they recalled the words of Psalm 69.

His disciples remembered that it is written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." (John 2:17)

It is not clear whether they recalled this at the time or on later reflection, after the Lord's resurrection. The Psalm says "zeal for your house consumes me" and John seems to be taking the Psalmist's words and by changing the tense of the verb, points forward to the Lord's death. Certainly it is the first incident to provoke Jewish hostility and involves a prophecy by the Lord concerning His death. On the other hand, John could simply be referring to the burning indignation and anger felt by the Lord at the sight of the desecration of His Father's house.

How many temples ?

The Jews' request for a sign is met with a confusing reply, which they interpret literally.

Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in three days. (John 2:19)

John tells us in verse 21 that He spoke, not of the temple building, but of His body. This is a similar response to the one that He gave the Jews in Matthew 12:39-40.

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

But it is still not exactly clear what He did mean. Two possibilities suggest themselves.

1. "Go on as you are doing and you will bring this temple down in ruin (at the hand of Rome) but in a brief time (three days), I will raise up another centre of worship." (A M Hunter Cambridge Bible Commentary p34)

2. If you kill me I will rise from the dead again in three days.

Of these the second is probably more likely since there is nothing in the Lord's words to suggest that the temple to be destroyed is different from the one to be raised up again and such an interpretation would have been impossible for His hearers to infer. However, in Matthew the Lord does predict the destruction of the temple and suggests that this would come about because of the Jews' refusal to come to Him.

How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate....(Matthew 23:37-38)

It is apparent that this involved the destruction of the temple because immediately after, at the start of chapter 24, when the disciples drew the Lord's attention to the beauty of the temple buildings His response was emphatic.

I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.(Matthew 24:2)

Some have seen in the Lord's words the replacement of the Jewish temple worship with a "spiritual building", anticipating Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you ? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

This, however, is very unlikely. Jesus makes no attempt here to suggest that the temple worship was outdated, and, as in the reference to the two temples in John 2:19, it would have been impossible for the Jews to arrive at such an understanding from His words. In fact, His very actions indicate that He still regarded the temple as His Father's house and was incensed at the corruption within it.

Rejection or faith ?

The Lord had come in the spirit of Malachi's prophecy, clearing the temple, and referred to it as "my Father's house". The Jews, with their knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures, presumably recognising the Messianic action, demanded a sign as proof of Jesus' identity, blindly ignoring the wonders the Lord was performing among them. The only sign offered to them was that of the prophet Jonah, but they would not or could not understand.

The disciples, on the other hand, unlearned men, later recalled the Lord's words and understood their significance. They had realised His identity when they first met Him (John 1:41,45,49) and this had been confirmed by His changing of water into wine (John 2:11). Although the full implications of Jesus' words were not understood until after His resurrection, the end result for the disciples was

the same.

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:22)

John's strategy

Once more John has given us another incident in the ministry of the Lord Jesus and concludes this part of his narrative by demonstrating the response in the disciples that he wishes to see in his readers. Their belief in Jesus as Messiah was strengthened as they meditated in faith on His words and actions.

No 8 BORN AGAIN - JOHN 3:1-21

The man who came by night

Nicodemus was a member of the Pharisee group in the Sanhedrin and an extremely important man. Jesus describes him in John 3:10 as "Israel's teacher" - not any teacher but the Master teacher of Israel. Much has been made of the fact that he came by night, and comparisons have been drawn with his spiritual state. However, it could as easily be that he came at that time to ensure privacy or for Jesus' convenience as for any reasons of secrecy.

It is possible that he did not come merely on his own behalf, since in 3:2 he says "we know you are a teacher who has come from God". Nicodemus had come because he and his colleagues had understood that the "signs" performed by the Lord Jesus had a divine origin. Jesus' response, however, cut through all his polite compliments.

It is revealing to consider the Lord Jesus' words to a man who was a spiritual leader of the nation of Israel, the people to whom the Lord had come. Nicodemus was a genuine seeker after the truth.

The new birth

I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. (3:3)

"Again" could be rendered "a second time" or "from above". From Nicodemus' reaction it is apparent he took the former meaning. The concept of a new birth was something which should have been familiar to Nicodemus in the context of converts to Judaism, who were said to be like new-born children. The Lord, however, was here applying the principle to pure, orthodox Jews. Nicodemus interpreted the Lord's words literally and was baffled. This gave Jesus the opportunity to explain Himself more fully.

I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. (3:5)

From this it is apparent that being "born again" is equivalent to being "born of water and the Spirit." This latter term is confusing. Should it be interpreted as a figure of speech meaning "spiritual water"? This would appear unlikely in view of the water baptism practised by John and subsequently by the Lord and His disciples later in the chapter and chapter 4.

Born of water

To experience the new birth meant first to submit to the water baptism administered by John. This baptism was a baptism that signified repentance.

He (John) went into all the country around Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3)

But the repentance was in the light of a very significant event - the coming kingdom. The kingdom of heaven - when God would rule on the earth from His headquarters at Jerusalem - was at hand. This was the message of John the Baptist and also the Lord in the early part of His ministry.

In those days John the Baptist came...saying "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."
(Matthew 3:2)

From that time on (John's imprisonment) Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."(Matthew 4:17).

Thus in the fourth gospel, the first stage in the new birth process was repentance, evidenced by cleansing by water.

Born of the Spirit

Baptism by water, however, was not enough. Men also had to come to the One who would baptise in Holy Spirit. John the Baptist had pointed the way:

The one who sent me to baptise with water told me," The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit." I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.(John 1:33-34)

Mark also records John's words.

I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. (Mark 1:8)

This inward power is contrasted with the outward sign of baptism to demonstrate repentance. John had been the forerunner, but now the Messiah Himself was introducing the new birth in its fulness. This had been anticipated in the Old Testament. Ezekiel experienced a vision in which the Spirit of God brought life to dry human bones. Ezekiel was asked to prophesy to the wind and command it in the name of the Lord to breathe life into the corpses.

So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet - a vast army. Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:10-11).

The Lord had foretold the day when He would breathe His Spirit into the House of Israel and they would live. They would be restored to their land in sovereignty. This is the backdrop against which the Lord Jesus introduced the subject of being born of the Spirit.

Wind or Spirit ?

As He discussed these matters with Nicodemus, the Lord Jesus used the analogy of the wind.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (3:8)

Similarly in Ezekiel, the work of the four winds typified the operation of the Spirit of God. In both passages the word used for "wind" and "Spirit" is the same and some have suggested that John is not referring to the wind at all. However, the use of the verb, "blows" and reference to the "sound" of it, indicate that the wind is being used as a picture of the operation of the Holy Spirit. Both are invisible

and unpredictable, but their effect can be witnessed.

Flesh and Spirit

Such a radical change as a rebirth is necessary because of the contrast between flesh and spirit. Mankind is flesh : God is Spirit. In order for the gap between the two to be bridged, Christ, whose home is in heaven, had to come to earth and take upon Himself "the likeness of sinful man" (Romans 8:3). Since He was the only One who had experience of both spheres, the initiative had to come from Him.

No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came down from heaven -the Son of Man. (3:13)

As far as man was concerned, the new, Spirit birth was the means by which entry could be made into the realm of Spirit. Man could not accomplish this by himself:

Flesh gives birth to flesh but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. (3:6)

The means of new birth

Nicodemus was bewildered by the information given to him.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. (3:9)

The Lord then expressed the truths He had been expounding in terms that Nicodemus could understand. How is this new Spiritual birth accomplished? It is by believing in Him.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life....God...gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life...Whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe stands condemned already... (3:14,15,16,18)

The message the Lord Jesus was proclaiming signified a radical break with the centuries of tradition. The symbolic miracle of the turning of the water into wine had already demonstrated His intention to supersede the old with the new. His cleansing of the temple in the latter part of the second chapter showed His authority to institute change. Now, speaking to the spiritual leader of Israel, the Lord revealed the extent of the change. The only means of access into the kingdom of God was by the new birth, accomplished by faith in Him.

No 9 THE WOMAN AT THE WELL - JOHN 4:4-42

A deviation from the norm ?

In chapter 10 of Matthew the Lord instructed the disciples in preparation for their mission:

Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. (Matthew 10:5)

The Lord's message was primarily to Israel and He urged His disciples to concentrate on the main task in hand, but periodically non-Israelites were blessed - for example the Roman centurion in Matthew 8, the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 and the Samaritan leper in Luke 17.

Here in John 4:4, we read that He "had to go through Samaria". This was because, as He travelled north from Judaea to Galilee, He had to go through Samaria to avoid a long detour, rather than because of any compulsion of the Spirit. This gave the opportunity for a firstfruit of the future extension of the Gospel, and in Acts 1:8 the disciples themselves are instructed to take the message to Judea, Samaria and beyond.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

A human Jesus

John is careful never to suggest that the Lord was not truly man. He alone of the four gospel writers tells that Jesus was thirsty on the cross. The picture he presents of Jesus seated and exhausted at the well at noon is an extremely human one. The disciples appear to have had more energy and went off to buy provisions. The woman, surprisingly, came to the well alone and at the hottest point of the day and the Lord first spoke to her on the ground of their common humanity, giving her the privilege of conferring a favour on Him.

The Jews and the Samaritans

The woman's surprise at Jesus' request was twofold. Firstly, it was surprising that a Jew should speak to a strange woman, and secondly, asking a favour like this from a Samaritan would have been considered a defilement by a Jew. John's explanation that "Jews do not associate with Samaritans" really means "Jews and Samaritans do not use the same drinking vessels."

With the woman's interest awakened, the Lord proceeded to reveal deep spiritual truths to her. The pattern of the conversation is typical of John's writing. The Lord's words, containing spiritual truth, are interpreted literally by the hearer and He is forced to explain further.

The symbol of water

The first part of the conversation, in verses 10-15, revolved round water - the water in the well, contrasted by the Lord with the "living water" which He offered the woman.

Natural water has already been used in the Gospel to represent the old order replaced by the Lord Jesus with something much greater. In the first miracle at Cana, the water contained in the Jewish

ceremonial purification jars was transformed into wine of the highest quality. The baptism of John was in water and is contrasted, by John himself, with a baptism in Holy Spirit, to be performed by One greater than he. (John 1:31-33). In the incident we are considering it is significant that the well was dug by Jacob, showing, as at the marriage in Cana and the cleansing of the temple, that the Lord's work supersedes the traditions handed down through Jewish history.

The woman herself asks :

Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well ? (John 4:12)

The question, of course, highlights the very point that John is trying to make in his gospel - that Jesus is greater than Jacob, because He is the Messiah.

True worship

From there the conversation moved on to consider the nature of worship, in verses 19-24.

The Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerizim which overlooked the well; the Jews worshipped on Mount Zion. Which was correct? The Lord, while affirming that "salvation is from the Jews" and pointing out the superiority of the Jewish worship since it was rooted in knowledge, made no attempt to answer the dispute. Instead, he pointed out that these distinctions were no longer relevant.

A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. (John 4:23)

Some commentators have suggested that the words "and has now come" were a comment by John rather than the words of the Lord. The point is irrelevant, however. The fact that rendered the old, outward form of worship obsolete was the advent of the Lord Jesus. Why was this new type of worship necessary?

God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4:24)

To understand the full significance of this, we must realise that the word used for "truth" here is not contrasted with "falsehood" but with "type" or "symbol". We have the same idea in John 6 where the Lord describes Himself as the "Bread of Life". He contrasts Himself, the "true bread" with the manna given in the desert.

When the Saviour said "Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven" (6:32), he did not deny that manna fell in the wilderness; He affirmed, that He was the reality of which the manna was a type. (C H Welch **Life through His Name** p133)

The Old Testament was full of types and pictures which pointed towards Christ. In His life and death on the cross He revealed Himself to be the reality which they symbolised. For example He was the spotless lamb whose blood was shed, pictured in the Passover ceremony annually in the Jewish calendar. So it became possible to worship God, who is Spirit, without the need for symbols and types. This is the highest, and in fact the only true way such a God can be worshipped.

For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17)

The reaction of the hearers

As in other places in John's Gospel, the reaction of men and women to Jesus was a crucial part in the identification of Him as Messiah. As He talked with the woman, her perception of Him deepened. First in verse 12 she asked:

Are you greater than our father Jacob ?

The way the question was framed inferred an answer in the negative, although it was true. But by verse 19 she was shaken by Jesus' insight into her life and declared:

Sir..I can see that you are a prophet.

Since the Samaritans did not recognise the prophecy in the Old Testament after the time of Moses, this statement could indicate that realisation was dawning on her that she was face to face with the coming prophet foretold in Deuteronomy 18:18:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.

The fact that this is more than just a reference to Joshua is confirmed by Deuteronomy 34:10

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.

Thereafter in verse 26 the Lord confessed that He was the Messiah she was anticipating and she ran back to the village to see her friends:

Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ? (John 4:29)

The Samaritans then invited Jesus to remain with them for two days and, as a result of His words, many of them believed.

We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world. (John 4:42)

Conclusion

We must marvel at the skill with which John, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, shows the gradual unveiling of the character of Christ to sinful men and women. As they saw His works and heard His words, they came to realise that He was a prophet, and more than a prophet, the Son of God Himself.

No 10 THE SON AND HIS FATHER - LIFE AND JUDGEMENT - JOHN 5:16-30

Two signs and their aftermath

In the latter part of chapter 4 Jesus healed the dying son of a royal official, without actually seeing the boy. Then, in the first 14 verses of chapter 5 we read of the healing of the cripple at the pool of Bethesda. The second miracle was performed on the Sabbath and the Jews objected to this. In response, Jesus gave a dissertation on His authority to act as He did, and on His relationship with His Father.

The Son's identity with the Father

Jesus opens His discourse with an explanation of why He felt free to heal on the Sabbath.

My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too am working. (5:17)

The Father's activity of maintaining and recreating has continued constantly from the beginning, Sabbath day or not and the Son was following His example. The Jews realised the full implication of Jesus' words and determined all the more to kill Him, not just for Sabbath-breaking, but because He claimed equality with God. By referring to God as His own, personal Father He was placing Himself above the human.

The Son's subservience to the Father

However, the Lord Jesus was not suggesting that there were two identical Gods each acting independently. Immediately He pointed out that He deferred to His Father in all things.

I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing. (5:19)

The Lord Jesus never acted independently of His Father. He had come to earth to do the will and works of His Father, who had sent him. This is pointed out in several places in the gospel. For example, in John 12:49 the Lord says:

For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.

The Father had given all things into the hands of the Son. The Father had the initiative and the Son carried out His instructions perfectly.

To the Jews, there were two functions performed by God and God alone - giving life and judging. In John 5 The Lord Jesus showed that they had been delegated to Him by the Father.

The function of giving life

As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself....For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. (5:26,21)

The Lord Jesus Christ possesses "life in himself", something that no human could claim. He had the self-existing life of God within Him. It was because of this that He could declare to the Jews "Before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58), the implications of which were not lost on His enemies, who tried to stone Him.

As the time of the crucifixion approached He stated that He had the power to lay down His life and take it again. This power had been given to Him by His Father.

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life - only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father. (John 10:17-18)

But the Father had also given Him the power to pass on this life to men. Prior to the raising of Lazarus the Lord comforted Martha in these terms:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. (John 11:25-26)

But the Lord did not only have the power to restore natural life, as in the case of Lazarus. He could also give eternal life.

I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live...a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. (John 5:25,28-29)

The purpose of the Lord's coming into the world was to give life.

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

The function of judging

The Lord did not come into the world for the purpose of judging (John 3:17). Nevertheless, judgement is a necessary consequence of His coming, and the power to judge was also delegated by the Father to the Son.

The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgement to the Son...He has given authority to judge because he is the Son of Man...I judge only as I hear, and my judgement is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.(John 5:22,27,30)

Just as belief and trust leads to life, so unbelief leads to condemnation and the Lord Jesus has the authority to judge. He administers the Father's judgement because He is the Son of Man. In the epistle to the Hebrews we read of the High Priest who is not unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but...who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

Here, in John, a similar thought emerges. The Lord Jesus, the perfect man, understands from His own experience, the human position, and is thus able to exercise judgement effectively.

Life or Death ?

The granting of life and the exercise of judgement are two sides of the same coin. The deciding factor is faith.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.(John 3:18)

The Lord Jesus declares that the power to give life and the power to condemn have been granted to Him by His Father. He performs the functions of God in these respects and thus reinforces His claim to deity in a manner which would be clear to the Jews.

Today the Lord Jesus still offers the choice of life to us. To reject Him means condemnation and death. To accept Him means forgiveness and eternal life. What will our choice be?

No 11 TESTIMONIES - JOHN 5:31-47

Astonishing claims

In the first part of chapter 5, the Lord Jesus had been making astonishing claims for Himself, affirming that God the Father had committed the functions of judging and giving eternal life to Him. This reached a climax in verses 28 and 29:

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his (my) voice and come out.

Was He able to substantiate these claims? As He observed in verse 30: "If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid."

In fact His testimony about Himself was valid as He declared in John 8:14, but such a testimony would carry no weight in the Jewish legal system. It required independent evidence. And in the rest of this chapter the Lord Jesus demonstrates that there was no lack of independent testimony to the validity of His claims.

The testimony of John the Baptist.

The theme of testimony is a very important one in this gospel and it is introduced to us in the opening chapter in the work of John the Baptist.

He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not that light; he came only as a witness to the light. (John 1:7-8)

So in chapter 5 the Lord speaks of the testimony of John in terms of a light:

John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. (John 5:35)

John himself was a lamp, powered by the light of the world. But the fact that Jesus spoke of him in the past tense showed that the lamp had now been extinguished. The Jews had recognised that John's claims carried considerable weight and in verse 33 Jesus reminded them that they had already sent a delegation to inquire of John (reported in John 1:19-28).

John's function was not to attract men to himself but to point them to Christ. He came as a witness to Christ. But the Jews would not listen.

The testimony of the works

John's testimony was important, but far more weighty evidence was available:

I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. (John 5:36)

The Old Testament Scriptures had foretold that Messiah would display signs and wonders which

would demonstrate His credentials to Israel. The Jewish leaders were well aware of this. After the cleansing of the temple they asked Jesus:

What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this? (John 2:18)

The signs were all around them, but they would not accept them. Nicodemus, in chapter 3, had admitted that the works of Jesus were evidence that God was with Him. (John 3:2)

But the "works" are more than just the signs. They cover all the Lord's activities on the earth - His words, His deeds, His conduct. All of these bore witness to Him and that the Father had sent Him. But the Jews would not accept.

The testimony of the Father

From the testimony of the works the Lord Jesus moved on to consider the direct testimony of His Father.

And the Father who sent me has testified concerning me. You have neither heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. (5:37-38)

There is some doubt as to what Jesus meant here. There seem to be two grounds of reproach to the Jews:

1. They had not heard the Father nor seen Him.
2. His word did not dwell in them.

The first of these is the more difficult. No man has seen God at any time but it seems unlikely that the Jews could reasonably be blamed for that. God had spoken at the baptism of Jesus and the Holy Spirit had come down on Him in the visible form of a dove. This particular event convinced John of the Lord's identity, but it is doubtful if Jesus was referring back to that incident.

In John 14:9, the Lord Jesus told His disciples that anyone who had seen Him had seen the Father. By recognising the Lord Jesus for who He was, believers see the Father also. Furthermore, in Jesus we encounter the Word of God, if we will recognise Him as such. John develops this theme in his first epistle:

We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. (1 John 5:9-10)

Thus it is that it is only by faith in Christ that this testimony becomes available to man. To reject Him is to reject the testimony of God.

So the final statement of verse 38 : "for you do not believe the one he sent", is the explanation for both failures on the part of the Jews. The only means of access to the Father is through the Son.

The testimony of Scripture

The Jews were steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures and taught that the way to eternal life was by studying the Torah. They had a zeal for God, but it was misdirected. They were missing the point since they did not see the One of whom the Scripture spoke:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (5:39-40)

The Lord Jesus is to be found in all the Scriptures. On the road to Emmaus:

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)

The Jews regarded the study of the Scriptures as an end in itself. But life was to be found in the Christ of the Scriptures, not in the writings as such.

In verse 44 the Lord put His finger on the reason for their unbelief.

How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from only God?

The Jews followed a rigid system of interpreting the Scriptures, examining the wordings in minute detail and following one another in a mutual admiration society. To deviate from the opinion of their peers was to bring scorn and rejection, which they could not face. So it was not possible for them to believe while they sought the praise of men. We see a good example of their attitude in John 7 where Nicodemus tentatively suggested that they ought to hear Jesus before condemning him.

They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee." (John 7:52)

The testimony of Moses

From a consideration of the Scriptures generally, Jesus focuses on Moses in particular.

If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?(5:46-47)

Moses was the hero of the Jewish people. He was the one who had delivered them from Egypt and led them to the brink of the promised land. Every year they celebrated their deliverance at the Passover feast. Moses was the one on whom their hopes were set (verse 45). But far from being their defender, Moses was going to be a prosecution witness against them. The reason for this was that, by not recognising the Lord's identity, they were disbelieving Moses, who wrote of Christ. Whether or not Jesus was referring to a specific passage in the writings of Moses (e.g. Deuteronomy 18:18) is a moot point. The Lord confirmed that Moses was a prophet and ironically their preoccupation with the law of Moses had blinded them to the identity of the subject of Moses' writings.

Adequate testimony?

In writing his gospel, John's aim was to show that Jesus was the Christ. He did this largely by referring to the reactions of people to the Lord Jesus and to their testimonies about Him. In chapter 5 he brings out the testimony of God Himself - directly in the hearts of those who believe, through His servant John the Baptist, through the works He had given His Son to do and through the Scriptures in general and Moses in particular. The approval and witness of God the Father underscored everything the Lord did. The evidence is there for us also if we have eyes to see it.

No 12 THE BREAD OF LIFE - JOHN 6:25-59

The preceding sign

In John 6:1-15 we have the incident of the feeding of the five thousand on the far shore of the Sea of Galilee. The people, marvelling at the miracle they had seen, wondered whether Jesus could be "the Prophet who is to come into the world" (verse 14) and followed Him round the lake to Capernaum. There Jesus explained the true significance of the sign.

He gave them bread from heaven to eat.

Jesus recognised at once that their faith was not genuine :

I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. (John 6:26-27)

The natural outlook of these people was typical of men's reaction. They came to Christ in the hope of more free food when they should have had a hunger for something which would last forever.

Jesus declared in verse 27 that He would give them this bread that endures to eternal life and this prompted them to recall that great event in their history when they had previously eaten "bread from heaven."

Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written : "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." (John 6:31)

Jesus, however, immediately cut away their complacency. Firstly, it was not Moses, but God who had given them the manna and secondly, that bread was only a type of the true "bread from heaven" which had now come. In fact there were a number of differences between the true bread and its type. Manna fed the people on a daily basis, but eventually they died. It had no power to sustain life indefinitely. In addition it was for the Hebrews only, at a certain period in time. The true bread gave eternal life to the world.

The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. (John 6:33)

"Give us this bread"

In His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, the Lord Jesus spoke of Himself as the giver of living water. She responded by asking "Sir, give me this water" (4:15). Similarly in this chapter as He describes Himself as the giver of "food that endures to eternal life" (6:27), His hearers reply "Sir...give us this bread" (6:34). Like the woman at the well, the Jews still understood Him to be speaking of material things, and He had to show them that, not only was He the giver of this bread, but that He Himself was the bread and the water.

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty (6:35)

The statement is tautologous. It is clear that "coming to" Christ is equivalent to "believing in" Him. This is especially important when we consider His next remark. Men cannot place their faith in Christ unless the Father draws them. This theme repeats itself throughout the passage:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away....No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him and I will raise him up at the last day...Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. (6:37, 44, 45)

The work of the Son is the work of the Father. The Son came to do His Father's will. His Father's will was that everyone who looked to the Son in faith had eternal life. To this end the Father drew men to the Son, and gave them to Him. The Son will raise them up at the last day without loss of a single one. The Son lives because of the Father (verse 57) and men were being given opportunity to live, in the same way, because of the Son.

"How can this man give us his flesh to eat ?"

The Lord Jesus was extremely blunt, even shocking, in His use of language here, especially when we bear in mind that the idea of eating flesh and drinking blood was abhorrent to the Jews.

There are three distinct points that the Lord makes :

1. This bread is my flesh.

Here is the bread that comes down from heaven which a man may eat and not die.... If anyone eats of this bread he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world. (6:50,51)

The "eating" of this bread is a once and for all act. The verb "eat" in verse 50 is in the aorist tense, speaking of the initial action of receiving Christ. There is no suggestion in these verses of continuing to "receive" Christ. The bread is Christ's body given for the world in sacrifice and "eaten" by the believer in faith.

2. Eating and drinking are the way to eternal life.

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (6:54)

Here the imagery is widened to include drinking the blood of Christ. A different word is used for "eat" from that of verse 54. The word used here normally refers to eating with relish, for example in Matthew 24:38. It seems to have been used by Jesus to indicate the vividness of the metaphor He was using. Again many have suggested that it refers to partaking of communion but it is probably better to interpret it in the same way as verse 51 - namely as referring to the act of receiving Christ for salvation. Anyone "eating" of Christ in this way will be given eternal life and Jesus will raise him up at the last day. Verse 40 saw the same offer being made to "everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him". Thus eating and drinking correspond to looking and believing and their primary reference is to the act of faith which identifies all Christians irrevocably with the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Eating and drinking are the way to remain in Christ

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. (6:56-57)

The relationship between the eater and his Lord is extremely close and permanent. The idea of "remaining" is very strong in John's writings. For example in John 15:4 believers are told that if they remain in Christ He will remain in them, and if they do not do this they will not bear fruit.

So unlike the previous references these verses suggest continuous eating and drinking, rather than a once and for all act. The idea of remaining in Christ implies an act of the will consistently applied, aided by the work of God's Spirit. Stability and growth in the Christian life depend on our constant assimilation of Christ by faith - by studying His Word, by prayer and meditation on Him.

Does this passage refer to the Lord's Supper?

There is no doubt that the Lord's primary references to eating and drinking of Himself cannot refer to any outward ritual. In verses 50 and 54 they refer to the initial act of salvation.

As Bishop Westcott observes:

The teaching has a full and consistent meaning in connexion with the actual circumstances, and it treats essentially of spiritual realities with which no external act, as such, can be co-extensive. The well-known words of Augustine **crede et manducati** "believe and thou **hast** eaten" give the sum of the thoughts in a luminous and pregnant sentence. (Westcott's **St John** p113)

Many people today, however, understand the ceremony of communion as a picture of this process of feeding on Christ, much in the same way as they regard water baptism as a picture of the spiritual reality of our death and resurrection with Christ. However, it does not appear that the Lord had this in mind when He spoke the words of John 6, especially since John himself makes no mention of the Lord's Supper in his description of the events leading up to the crucifixion. It is unlikely that he would make such an oblique reference to the ceremony without following it up with the institution of the ceremony itself.

The spiritual reality of partaking of Christ by faith for salvation and a continual feeding on Him for growth are unconnected with all outward rituals. They depend on the willingness of the individual to allow the Lord to work in him, strengthening him in his inner being, thereby enabling Christ to dwell in his heart. (Ephesians 3:16-17)