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## Preface

If I remember rightly, I was standing on the platform at Welwyn North Railway Station with my pastor, Mostyn Roberts, when I remarked that we need a Welwyn Commentary on the Gospel of John. I was not thinking of myself as the author! A few days later Mostyn rang, on behalf of Evangelical Press, inviting me to write a commentary on John.

As I considered this invitation, I asked a question—maybe you are asking that question—do we really need another commentary on the fourth Gospel? I have several already! Yes, we do! The Welwyn Commentaries are for Christians who want to grapple seriously with the biblical text and its application to their lives and who may like to use this series in their daily reading of the Scriptures. Those who teach God’s word, to various age groups, have also found the Welwyn Commentaries useful in elucidating the meaning of a passage without reading pages of academic debate.

My diary quickly emptied of preaching dates with the arrival of Covid in 2020. It was time to fulfil my promise to write a commentary on John! This Welwyn Commentary on John is

a companion to John Legg on Matthew, Steve Wilmshurst on Mark and Michael Bentley on Luke—and completes the Welwyn Commentary Series. The whole Bible focuses on Christ, but the Gospels especially centre on him.

As a result of writing this commentary, I am more convinced—not that I had any doubts—that Jesus is God. He is our glorious Saviour, God's Son. May we, like Thomas, adore him as our Lord and our God (20:28).

**Stan Evers**

## Introduction

**F**lying into Madrid I saw several houses with swimming pools in the garden. Someone has said that the fourth Gospel is like a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant may swim.

The New Testament opens with four Gospels, but why four? God gave us four Gospels, so we must assume that there was a reason. Are they just biographies, each writer giving his own slant on Christ's life? They are more than biographies, though they mostly follow the chronological sequence of his life. Their collective title, Gospels, explains that they all tell the good news but from different perspectives. The good news is that God saves sinners through the death of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Synoptic Gospels**

Commentators describe Matthew, Mark and Luke as the Synoptic Gospels but often disagree about the source materials for each Gospel. We do not need to enter into these erudite debates because we believe that 'All scripture is breathed out by God' (2 Timothy 3:16). However, divine authorship does not rule out human research; for example, Luke, the historian, was

painstaking in his research. Nevertheless, God is the divine author of his book (Luke 1:1-4). The word Synoptic comes from the Greek language and means 'seeing together'. These three books give a parallel overview of the Saviour's life and his teaching. Thomas Moore, nineteenth-century American Presbyterian, wrote, 'The gospel is a harp with four strings.'<sup>1</sup> We need each string of the harp! The sweet melody of Matthew is that Christ is the King descended from the royal line of David (Matthew 1:1-17). Mark describes him as the Servant (Mark 10:45), and Luke depicts him as the Son of Man (Luke 19:10).

### **The fourth Gospel**

The fourth Gospel does not come under the umbrella of the Synoptic Gospels because it is obviously distinct from the other three. This Gospel begins by declaring that Jesus is God (1:1-2), and again towards the end we read Thomas' declaration when he sees the risen Saviour, 'My Lord and my God!' (20:28). Only John explicitly identifies Jesus as God. In addition to this, John leaves out material found in the Synoptics: such as Jesus' temptations, his transfiguration and the institution of the Lord's Supper. Yet, he does include material not found in the other Gospels, such as John chapters 2-4, which relate Jesus' first miracle when he turned water into wine, plus his conversations with Nicodemus and the woman of Samaria. It is only in the fourth Gospel that we read the Saviour's extended teaching in the Temple and in various synagogues, and about his final hours instructing the disciples (chapters 13-16). Of course, there is some overlap, such as Jesus feeding the five thousand that occurs in all four Gospels, though only John mentions the boy with the loaves and fish (John 6:8-9).

Why does John write his Gospel? He gives us the answer to that question in 20:30-31, 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;



but these are written so 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 wants us to understand that Jesus is the promised Christ (Hebrew Messiah) and that he is the Son of God and then, because we grasp who he is, to receive eternal life by believing in his name. To achieve this aim the apostle selects seven 'signs' that display Jesus' deity. John is the only Gospel writer to relate five of these miracles. The apostle also highlights the seven 'I am' sayings of Jesus, which are exclusive to the fourth Gospel. These seven sayings are rooted in God's self-revelation at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14) and identify Jesus as God. The miracles and the sayings form the framework of John's Gospel.

### **Who wrote John?**

I have no hesitation in affirming that the apostle John wrote the Gospel that bears his name, plus three letters and the book of Revelation. As our Saviour's life draws to an end, we read several times about 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. After Jesus reveals that 'one of you will betray me', Peter prompts this disciple to ask Jesus to name the betrayer, and we read that, 'One of the disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table close to Jesus' (13:21-24). Jesus dying on the cross entrusts the care of Mary, his mother, to 'the disciple whom he loved' (19:26-27). Turning to 21:7, we read that the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' was the first to recognise the risen Lord waiting for them on the beach. When Jesus warns Peter that he will die a martyr's death, he sees 'the disciple whom Jesus loved ... the one who had been reclining at table close to him', and asks, 'Lord, what about this man?' (21:20-21). A few verses later this disciple identifies himself as a witness of Jesus' life and the writer of the fourth Gospel (21:24). 'These things' (21:24) is everything contained in chapters 1-21. I think that we may assume that 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' is

John. He does not name himself because he desires Christ's glory rather than his own.

Scholars debate whether John wrote his Gospel while living in Ephesus (in present-day Turkey) or while exiled on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. The Roman emperor, Domitian, who ruled from AD 81–86, banished the apostle to Patmos. His successor Nerva allowed John to return to Ephesus where he died during the reign of Trajan about the year 98. Tradition favours the apostle John writing, around AD 80–85, his Gospel from Ephesus, where he lived for several years. John's numerous references to the Old Testament infer that many of his readers, though not all, were, like himself, Jews.

We see a display of God's sovereign grace changing John, and his brother James, from 'Boanerges Sons of Thunder' who wanted to call 'fire from heaven' on the unbelieving Samaritans, into Jesus' disciples (Mark 3:17; Luke 9:51–56). Loving one another, as evidence of love to Christ, is a dominant theme in the apostle John's three letters. He took to heart his Master's command to 'love one another' (13:31–35; 15:12). In the final book of the Bible, John echoes the baptizer's words, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29; Revelation 5:6,8,12–13; 19:6–9). The focus of the Revelation is the glory of the Lamb.

### **Come to the feast**

To read John is like eating a delicious meal. I have laid the table, now I invite you to eat!

# **The Prologue**

## **(1:1-18)**



# 1

## The eternal Word

*Please read John 1:1-13*

Reading the Gospel of John is like entering a magnificent palace with twenty-one rooms. Walking through the door brings us into a grand foyer, the eighteen-verse Prologue (1:1-18). Understanding this Prologue is beyond even the most scholarly theologian, yet, grasping something of its meaning, is essential to enter into the rich treasures of the fourth Gospel.

### **Before time 1:1-2**

Matthew opens his Gospel with Jesus' family tree (Matthew 1:1-17) and the story of Joseph perplexed at the pregnancy of his fiancée (Matthew 1:18-25). An angel reassures him in a dream that her conception fulfils Isaiah's prophecy of a child born to a virgin, who is Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:14). Mark starts with John the Baptist preparing the way for Messiah's coming (Mark 1:1-8). Luke, the doctor and historian, records events leading to the conception and birth of Jesus in the Bethlehem manger (Luke 1-2). John takes us back before

time and gives us a glimpse of the glorious and eternally existent person.

John's opening three words, 'In the beginning', unmistakably echo the first verse of Genesis, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1). John uses the word 'beginning' to mean the absolute beginning, the creation of the universe. The apostle is not saying that Jesus had a beginning, but that he was already there when God made the heavens and the earth. He was uncreated; indeed, he shared creation with God (1:3-4). Mark Johnston paraphrases, 'In the beginning there was Someone who had no beginning.'<sup>1</sup> The word 'beginning' may also allude to the initial verse of Mark's Gospel, 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1). To quote Don Carson, 'Mark has told you about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry; I want to show you that the starting point of the gospel can be traced farther than that, before the beginning of the entire universe.'<sup>2</sup>

### **The Word 1:1-2**

The meaning of 'the Word' is rooted in the Old Testament rather than in first-century Greek philosophy, as some academics propose. God spoke to create the world (Genesis 1:1-31; Psalm 33:6). Moreover, he spoke his commands to Moses (Exodus 20:1), and his word to prophets (see, for example, Isaiah 38:4; Jeremiah 1:4). He now speaks in a person, his Son (Hebrews 1:1-3). To use A. W. Pink's words, 'He is God's alphabet, the One who spells out Deity; the One who utters all God has to say.'<sup>3</sup>

John explicitly tells us that, 'The Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1:1). The word 'with' on this occasion means 'face to face' and expresses the intimate oneness of the Father and the Son. We read in 1:18 that the pre-incarnate Son was 'at the Father's side', the literal Greek reads, 'in the bosom of

the Father'. The Word was not only with God, he was God (1:1). He is not 'a god' (as Jehovah's Witnesses argue), but fully God.<sup>4</sup> Gordon Keddie comments, "There is no textual basis for denying the deity of Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup> The literal Greek reads, 'God was the Word'. Thomas worshipped Jesus as God, 'My Lord and my God!' So should we! (John 20:28). 'The Word was God' (1:1), but distinct from God. There is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:6), but three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are equally God—this is the doctrine of the Trinity. It is true that the term 'Trinity' is not in the Bible; nevertheless, the doctrine certainly is. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are placed alongside one another in several Scriptures, such as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20: 'name', not names) and in the familiar doxology (2 Corinthians 13:14). The works and words of Jesus are the works and words of God. Why is it necessary to insist that Jesus is God? If Jesus were less than God, he would be powerless to save a single soul. The salvation of sinners rests on the foundation of Christ's deity.

### **The Creator 1:3**

The Father and the Son worked in harmony in the creation of all things (1:3). Paul's words to the Colossians come to mind, 'For by him [Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:16–17). The 'thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities' are angels. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that 'through whom [God's Son] also he made the world ... and he upholds the universe by the word of his power' (Hebrews 1:2–3). In the final book of the Bible, the aged apostle John writes about 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation' (Revelation 3:14). 'The faithful witness' is identified as

Jesus Christ in Revelation 1:5. 'Beginning', as in John 1:1, does not mean that God created Christ, but that he was there when God began to create. The creating Word has power to save sinners. In him, we are 'a new creation' because 'God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:17; 4:6).

### **The Life 1:4**

Jesus calls himself the life (11:25; 14:6) and the light (8:12; 9:5). Light signifies holiness, truth, love and knowledge; on the other hand, darkness is a symbol for depravity, deception, hatred, ignorance and misery; spiritually, we are both dead and in darkness.

God who created physical life through his Son gives spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). Before conversion, we are as spiritually dead, as Lazarus was physically dead, and like him, unable to give ourselves new life. Christ who commanded Lazarus to come out of his tomb (11:17-44) 'made us alive' (Ephesians 2:5). We receive life because of Christ's death and resurrection. He took our sin. He died the death we deserve. Now, even while on earth, we have eternal life (3:36; 5:24; 10:28). We read, later in this Gospel, that when Christ returns the dead will come out of their graves: believers to 'the resurrection of life', and unbelievers to 'the resurrection of judgment' (5:28-29).

### **The Light 1:4-13**

The other metaphor that John uses is that of light. Christ is the light who has come into the darkness of this world (1:4-5). How are we are to interpret 'the light of men' (1:4)? John's point is that each person has an innate awareness of God and an inescapable feeling of accountability to a divine being (Romans 1:19-23). Sadly, not all welcome the light; they try to extinguish it by



silencing their consciences, but it troubles them like a relentless toothache. They refuse to come to Christ the light for salvation, and, if they do not repent, will spend an eternity in a world of darkness (Matthew 8:12). The second half of John 1:5, ‘The darkness has not overcome it’—the light—causes debate among the commentators. John is saying that sinners cannot extinguish the light of the gospel that centres in Christ the light.

### *The light revealed 1:6–9*

‘A man sent from God, whose name was John’ proclaims the coming of Jesus Christ, the King of kings (1:6). This John was not the apostle and author of the fourth Gospel, but John the Baptist. All four Gospel writers mention the Baptist (Matthew 3:1–12; Mark 1:1–8; Luke 3:1–22).

John’s name means ‘God’s favour’ or ‘the grace of God’. John was himself God’s gift of grace declaring Jesus’ imminent arrival. It is in Christ that sinners receive God’s saving grace. John was ‘sent by God’, as was Moses (Exodus 3:10–15) and the prophets (for example, Isaiah 6:8–13; Jeremiah 1:4–19). He was the last of the prophets (Matthew 11:9–10). God sent John to direct sinners to the Life and to the Light, whom God sent as the Saviour of the world (4:42).

John the apostle tells us that John the Baptist ‘came to bear witness about the light’ (1:7). A witness testifies to what he has seen or heard; he does not give his own opinions and theories; he tells the truth. John speaks of an actual historical person whose coming into the world was of immense significance. Our response to him has everlasting consequences. John is not the light; therefore, he does not talk about himself, but about Christ the true light (1:8–9). The purpose of John’s witness was ‘that all might believe through him’ (1:7). He does more than impart information, he points to the light that saves. Believers reflect

the light of Jesus Christ just as the moon reflects the light of the sun (Matthew 5:14–16).

Look now at verse 9, ‘The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.’ The phrase ‘coming into the world’ refers to the birth of the God-man, the eternally existent light. Jesus is ‘the true light’, the genuine and final light. He is ‘*the* light of the world’ (8:12; 9:5); he is not one light among many. He ‘gives light to everyone’ (1:9). What does this puzzling statement mean? It certainly does not suggest a universal salvation, that everyone, from all religions, and even the irreligious, will eventually reach heaven. The ‘everyone’ could mean that all, without exception, are aware of God and have an inbuilt sense of accountability to God—this is what theologians call ‘general revelation’. Another view of this verse is that Jesus the light gives spiritual perception to all kinds of people without distinction, but not to everyone—what theologians call ‘special revelation’. The light has come; therefore, those who prefer darkness have no excuse for rejecting the light.

### *The light rejected 1:10–11*

How did people respond to Christ the light? The world—people created in his own image—did not recognise him (1:10; Genesis 1:26–27). Worse than that, his own nation, the Jewish race, did not welcome him. The nation expecting the Messiah-Saviour for hundreds of years rejected him when he came (1:11). They saw his miracles and heard his words but failed to understand the meaning of his mission and his message. We live two thousand years later in a world that still does not grasp who he is and why he came. Every December people enjoy seeing cute little children in nativity plays and heartily sing Christmas carols but don’t have a clue why he was born in Bethlehem. Come Easter, they buy chocolate eggs and hot cross buns, never giving a thought to the reason for the Saviour’s death. More tragic