

Reading the Gospels as Literature: John
May 10, 2012

1. Recap: The diasporas
 - a. In 722 BCE, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and many Israelites were deported to Persia and Media.
 - b. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon overthrew Judah in 597 BCE and deported all of the wealthy families and leaders, artists, scribes, musicians—those who maintained Judean culture—to Babylon.
 - c. Another group of Judeans fled to Egypt and established communities in the Nile river delta.
 - d. During the Babylonian Exile, the Judeans were allowed to form a distinct community identity within Babylon, under their own laws, though they had no particular political influence.
 - e. Cyrus the Great (aka Cyrus of Persia) conquered Babylon in 540 BCE.
 - f. In 538 BCE, allowed the Judeans to return to Israel.
 - i. Most remained in Babylon. (There has been a significant Jewish population in what is now Iran ever since.)
 - ii. The most religious exiles returned to Judea.
 - g. The second temple
 - i. The returned exiles rebuilt the temple
 - ii. They organized themselves into a deeply religious community, attached to the Torah and the temple.
 - iii. The Judeans grew in numbers, recruiting members from various groups, and sought independence, which they achieved.
 - iv. Problems within the royal family, coupled with the people's growing dissatisfaction with their rulers whom they believed were not dedicated to the religious identity of the nation, created instability.
 - h. Roman occupation
 - i. In 63 BCE, Pompey invaded and Jerusalem came under Roman control.
 - ii. The Judeans revolted in 70 CE. The Romans retaliated, destroying the temple and most of Jerusalem, ending with the siege of Masada in 73.
 - iii. Greek and Roman colonies were established in Judea as part of the Roman plan to prevent the political regeneration of Israel.
 - iv. More Jews lived outside Judea than within it.
 - v. The Romans treated all Jews, whether inside Judea or outside it, as a distinct ethnic group and imposed an annual temple tax on them.
 - vi. Hadrian became the Roman emperor in 118 CE.
 - (1) He was sympathetic to the Jews and allowed them to return to Jerusalem
 - (2) Hadrian also granted permission to rebuild the temple
 - (3) He went back on his word, though, demanding that the site of the temple be relocated.
 - (4) He also began deporting Jews to North Africa.
 - vii. In 132, the Jews organized guerrilla forces and began launching attacks against

- the Romans. Hadrian brought in an extra army legion to deal with the terrorism
- viii. In 132, Hadrian changed the name of Jerusalem to Aelia Capitolina and began to build a temple to Jupiter in place of the Jewish temple.
 - ix. From 135, Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem on pain of death except on the day of Tish B'Av, when they were allowed to mourn the destruction of the temple by both the Babylonians and the Romans.
2. Text issues
 - a. Various translation or punctuation problems
 - b. There's an enormous amount of scholarly debate about sources and the history of redaction for this gospel.
 - c. The story of the woman caught in adultery (7:52-8:11) has been decisively determined not to belong to John. It's considered an "orphan story."
 - i. One important group of MSS places it after Luke 21:38.
 - ii. Two other traditions place it after John 7:44 or John 21:25.
 3. The gospel contains gnostic elements, though Gnosticism did not come into its fullness until the second century.
 - a. In gnostic thought, salvation comes from secret knowledge
 - b. Gnostic thinking includes radical dualism, such as concepts of "from above" vs. "from below" or "on earth" or the light/logos split in 1:1-18.
 - c. Gnostic thought seeks a spiritual understanding of events, a system of double meanings, metaphorical symbols and allegorical interpretations the true meaning of which are hidden or available only to a select elite.
 - d. Raymond Brown observes that the portrait of Jesus in John's gospel would fit into a gnostic world view: Jesus is portrayed as a saviour from an alien world above who says that neither he nor those who accept him are of this world and who promises to return to take his followers to a heavenly dwelling.
 4. There is no apocalyptic in John, but Gnosticism has its roots in Jewish apocalyptic.
 - a. Apocalyptic literature is intended to address the problems arising when, despite belonging to a righteous God, people suffer on earth.
 - b. Most scholars believe that the gospel is addressed to a Christian community living in extreme crisis. It is intended to strengthen their faith and provide reassurance.
 - c. Attention to nurturing faith (chs. 14-17)
 - i. Concerns about apostasy (6:60-69)
 - ii. The theme of the quality of a sound faith (4:33-53; 6:25-27; 20:29)
 - d. John's community seems to be a tiny Christian minority surrounded and threatened by the Jewish community from which they have recently been expelled.
 5. Jesus
 - a. He is not identified with the poor and has no connection with outcasts.
 - b. He performs miracles, called "signs" in the Greek text (in Mark, the miracles are called

- “mighty works”). The purpose of the signs is to prove that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God.
- c. The miracles are not described in detail, other than the wedding at Cana, the healings of the official's son, the blind man and the crippled man, and the raising of Lazarus.
 - d. There are no exorcisms in this gospel.
 - e. Jesus may have performed baptisms (3:22, 4:1 which is denied at 4:2)
 - f. After his meeting with the woman at the well, Many Samaritans from her town believed in him (4:39)
 - g. Jesus is almost constantly hunted by “the Judeans,” who twice attempt to stone him. There are frequent references to their desire to put him to death
 - i. The Judeans hound him because he would do things like healing on the sabbath (5:16)
 - ii. They want to kill him because he breaks the sabbath and also describes himself as God's equal. (5:18)
 - iii. Many disciples don't want to travel around with him after he talks about being the bread of heaven in the synagogue at Capernaum because they're afraid of the reactions he's receiving from the Judeans (6:66). The twelve remain, however, because, as Peter says, he has the words of real life.
 - h. Jesus travels incognito to Jerusalem (7:10) and at various points goes into hiding.
 - i. When he says things the Judeans find shocking, he's accused of being out of his mind (7:20) and of being a Samaritan (8:48).
 - j. Other followers—the parents of the man born blind, Joseph of Arimathea—are described as being afraid of the Judeans.
 - i. The man's parents hesitate to speak to Jesus because they fear that acknowledging him will result in them being banned from the synagogue (9:22).
 - ii. The man is ejected from the synagogue when he tells them about his healing (9:25-34).
 - k. The Pharisees are alarmed by the following Jesus is developing and express their dismay at various points.
 - i. There is particular concern after Lazarus is raised because even more people start to believe in Jesus.
 - ii. The priests and Pharisees call the Council together to address the problem:
 - (1) Jesus is performing so many miracles
 - (2) If they let him go on like this, everyone will start believing in him
 - (3) Then the Romans will come and destroy the temple and the nation (11:48)
 - iii. The ranking priests plot to have Lazarus killed because his raising has resulted in many conversions.
 - l. The focus is on Jesus' divinity which is simply proclaimed in the opening of the gospel (1:1-18) and thereafter taken for granted.
 - m. Jesus is definitely *Christian*.
 - i. More than any other gospel, this is written from in the light of the Resurrection from the outset.
 - ii. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus is an itinerant Jewish teacher who mostly lives and works among the poor. Not in John.

- iii. He comes from heaven and says that he is God. Unambiguously, he is the Messiah.
 - iv. He isn't human. He describes himself in metaphors: light, truth, life, the way, bread, a vine.
 - v. He's a pneumatic character: everything about him is a spiritual distillation of what his coming and ministry means to the John and his community.
 - n. Jesus does not teach in parables as he does in the synoptics.
 - o. He seems to know everything that is going to happen to him ahead of time and frequently refers to "his time," meaning the trial and crucifixion.
 - p. He gives long monologues about truth, life and light.
 - i. He speaks ambiguously, perhaps intentionally so (3:3)
 - ii. His hearers often do not understand what he says and are contrasted with "the Judeans" whose inability to understand is foreordained.
 - iii. He frequently uses the phrase "I am", both to mean "this is me" and also to invoke the divine I AM of Hebrew Scripture.
 - iv. He declares himself to be the Messiah (4:36, etc.)
 - v. He makes strong declarations, using the words, "As God is my witness" or "I swear to God" (in the Scholars Version) or "Very truly, I tell you" (in the NRSV).
 - q. Jesus denounces the Judeans
 - i. They don't believe in Moses. He says that Moses will be their accuser before God because he is the one Moses wrote about (5:46). (In fact, Moses never makes any predictions about a Messiah. In John, "Moses" seems to represent all of Scripture, not just the Torah, but also the prophets and Psalms.)
 - ii. They are "children of the devil" (8:44) who "was a murderer from the start."
 - iii. He says that they don't understand what he says because they don't belong to God (8:47)
 - iv. He says that the Judeans don't observe the Law (7:19).
 - v. He says that he "came into the world" to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who "belongs to the truth" can hear his voice (18:37).
6. John: the most anti-Jewish gospel
- a. This is a Jewish gospel.
 - i. It's written by a Jewish Christian, well-immersed in Hellenic Judaism.
 - ii. It's written for a community of Jewish Christians living in a Jewish context.
 - b. The synoptics portray Jesus in terms of his radical inclusivity. John sees the world as strongly divided between Gentiles, Christians and Jews. There is no inclusiveness. The three factions are at war and their differences cannot be reconciled.
 - c. Christian anti-Semitism has long been fuelled by this gospel, reinforced by Matthew's gospel
 - i. John is the only gospel to speak of the Jewish people monolithically, as "the Jews."
 - ii. In the synoptics, "the Jews" is a term only used by Pilate.
 - iii. John makes no distinction between the different groups within Judaism. He notes only the Pharisees and the priests.
 - (1) There are no Sadducees, Zealots, scholars or scribes, just as there are no tax

- collectors, prostitutes, rich or poor people.
- (2) This may be the writer's own experience of Judaism when he's writing. After the destruction of the temple and the beginning of the diaspora, the different religious and cultural factions were less significant.
 - (3) The Pharisees remained important because they had established the synagogues during the Babylonian exile and had continued the synagogue traditions after the temple was restored.
- iv. John places the responsibility for the crucifixion with the Jews/Judeans, or perhaps with some religious officials.
- (1) Whether Pilate believed Jesus to be innocent or not, he certainly had oversight of his execution.
 - (2) Jews never practised crucifixion.
 - (3) The Scholars Version calls the assertion that Pilate turned Jesus over to the Judeans a “monstrous unreality . . . [which] must be entirely a function of theological or political polemic” (see note to 19:16).
- d. Whereas the synoptic gospels reflect discomfort with non-Christian Judaism (in Mark) or outright hostility towards the synagogues (in Matthew), in John's gospel, things have progressed to outright warfare between what is now Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism.
- e. For John, since Jesus is the Messiah, there is nothing left for Israel to say, or be, or do. Judaism has come to an end and any Jews who fail to recognize Jesus as Messiah are living outside the bounds of God's salvation.