

JOURNEYS OF FAITH IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: A GUIDEBOOK FOR ALL AGES

Unpublished Manuscript, Jeffrey L. Staley

PREFACE

This book has grown out of my professional work in the Gospel of John and a personal desire to bring that academic interest to the broader Christian community. My life has gone through a lot of changes in the past ten years. I have married, finished a Ph.D., secured a teaching position, moved to a new city and state, bought a house, had two children, watched my mother and father-in-law die, lost my job, and lived away from my loved ones for an extended period of time. Through all these experiences and transitions the gospel of John has been a source of reflection and renewal for me. I love this book. Like me, few of its characters find following Christ to be a simple or easy venture. Even when one finds bold affirmations of faith (Jn 1:45; 3:2; 9:33; 11:27; 13:37), they are often followed by questions, doubts, rejection, or failure.

I believe that the Gospel of John was written both to encourage spiritual life and also to problematize, or expose its difficulties. So I have written this book on John especially for individuals who are beginning to reflect upon their spiritual journeys. I have in mind particularly those who may be thinking about joining a church and have questions about what that means, and for groups of people within churches or parishes who are participating in “New Members” classes or adult initiation programs. This book is not in any way intended to replace a basic introduction to Christian Scripture, theology, or ethics, but rather is intended to facilitate open-ended thinking and discussion around three important concerns: self-reflection on our individual stories, careful reading of an important New Testament book, and interpersonal dialogue between our stories and John’s story of Jesus.

The study centers on the gospel of John for a number of reasons. First, it is the New Testament document that I am most familiar with, having published two books and numerous scholarly articles on the gospel. Secondly, and more importantly, in contrast to the other three gospels, John’s gospel offers the spiritual traveler a variety of vivid images and portraits of

characters who have extended, complicated interactions with Jesus. Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the lame man, the blind man, Mary and Martha, Peter, and Pilate all come to mind, and most of these characters will find their way onto the pages of this book. Thirdly, by following the role of the elusive disciples throughout the course of the Gospel, the book itself seems to have an overarching movement and direction to it. Only in this Gospel do the disciples begin their experience with Jesus by making profound statements regarding his identity and character (Jn 1:41, 45, 49; 2:11), then move through confusion (Jn 4:27-33; 6:5-9; 11:11-15; 13:36-38; 14:8-10; 16:16-20), desertion and betrayal (Jn 6:60-71; 13:21-30 18:15-27), to ultimate restoration (Jn 20:26-29; 21:15-23).

Throughout this book and in many other books on John that the reader might pick up, one will discover that the terms “John” and the “Fourth Gospel” are used interchangeably. For New Testament scholars, the term “Fourth Gospel” helps to distinguish John from the first three New Testament Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are often called “Synoptic Gospels.” The word “Synoptic” comes from the Greek words “syn” meaning “with” or “together,” and “optic” a word which has to do with “seeing.” The name “Synoptic” was given to the first three gospels in the eighteenth century because they can be “seen together,” and put easily into parallel columns for comparative study. Most scholars today believe that the reason there is so much similarity among the first three gospels is because Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source. Mark probably wrote first, around 70 CE. Then Matthew and Luke, copying parts of Mark and adding new material, probably wrote around 85 CE. But as we shall see in the first chapter of this book, the Fourth Gospel does not fit as naturally into the parallel structure of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Even though the Fourth Gospel was probably written last of the four, around 90 CE, it does not seem to use the other three as sources.

But the term “Fourth Gospel” also masks another debate among scholars. By and large, contemporary New Testament scholarship argues that the original author of this book, as with the first three gospels, is not known to us. We do know, however, that the earliest handwritten copies of the four gospels circulated with no names attached to them, and that it was not until three or four generations later (roughly 170 CE), that the names we know them by were put to them. About that time there were numerous other gospels and oral traditions circulating among the churches which were also fighting for a voice in Christian worship and instruction. It was important, then, to be able to establish the authority of traditions about Jesus, and one way to do this was to argue for widespread readership and apostolic authorship. It was in this context that the first gospel was associated with the apostle Matthew, and the Fourth Gospel associated with the apostle John. Moreover, Mark was said to get his information from Peter, and Luke was connected with Paul.

These overly simple, apostolic associations are not in themselves a sufficient reason for questioning or rejecting the apostle John’s authorship of the Fourth Gospel. But when coupled with other arguments based upon a careful reading of the book, the arguments become persuasive to most scholars. All this is to make it clear to the reader that when I use the name “John,” I do not mean the son of Zebedee the Galilean fisherman, brother of James, disciple of Jesus (Mk 1:19; 3:17), but simply the Gospel to which the church has attached the name “John.”

For those who are still curious about these questions of authorship and wish to pursue them further, I suggest reading the introduction to D. A. Carson's commentary on John, which argues for the apostle John's authorship, and John Marsh's or Robert Kysar's introductions which argue against it (see the bibliographic references below).

A Word to Group Leaders

From my experience in using this material, the most valuable time for a group will be the time spent reading the text of John, reflecting on it, and sharing stories of your spiritual journeys. Thus, this book is not designed to be read "in class" by a group leader, but rather is meant to raise questions and prod the sorts of memories that will facilitate open ended discussion and personal insight into our spiritual pilgrimages. For this same reason I have tried to keep the number of questions in each chapter to a minimum. I know from years of teaching that the more questions one has, the less time there is to spend on each, and the more difficult it becomes for a leader to select the most pertinent questions and summarize discussion for the group.

The questions in each chapter are divided into two kinds. Those listed under the "Reading Assignment" at the beginning of each chapter deal with the text of John. Those that deal with our own personal spiritual journeys are to be found at the end of each chapter. Again, from my own experience, I have discovered that a helpful way of using class time is to use the questions related to the text of John as "ice-breakers" near the beginning of the class, after people have had a chance to read through the text and think about it. There is no real need to break a large class into smaller groups at first.

On the other hand, I have found that the second set of questions work better in smaller groups where people find it easier to share their own personal stories. My suggestion, therefore, when used in a class, is that the class be broken down into groups of three or four people for at least fifteen minutes of discussion during the latter half of the time together. This will lead to more interaction and broader participation. The leader may also want to designate a "secretary" for each group who will write down the group's insights as the discussion progresses. This will make it possible for the leader to wander about and help out where discussion may be lagging. At the end of the individual group discussion period, five to ten minutes should be reserved for joining together and sharing the various groups' insights. At this time the leader may want to write down the class' insights on a chalkboard.

Finally, I wish to thank the members of the adult Bible class at Bethany Presbyterian Church, Portland, Oregon who gave me a place to share the initial idea of this project. I am also much beholden to the community of Holden Village, Chelan, Washington who invited me to spend two weeks with them in the summer of 1991, sharing insights from the Gospel of John. Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank my many friends at Multnomah Presbyterian Church, Portland, Oregon who were an encouragement and strength to me in a difficult time of transition, and who listened with an enthusiastic and critical ear to the third version of this project.

Brief Annotated Bibliography

As I stated at the outset, for those who have little knowledge of the Bible or want to do serious, extended study of the gospel of John, this book should not take the place of standard commentaries, Bible dictionaries, or specialized studies in John. Because of the more narrow purpose of this book, I have listed below a number of inexpensive and reputable, nontechnical resources which beginning students or group leaders should find helpful for a more detailed study of John.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books. Edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland Murphy. New Revised Standard Version. Oxford, 1991. This recent translation has become the standard for many churches and schools. It is sensitive to issues of gender, and full of articles on such topics as "Introduction to the New Testament," "Literary Forms in the Gospels," English Versions of the Bible," and "Modern Approaches to Biblical Study." Each book of the Bible is preceded by a brief introduction and each page has notes at the bottom explaining problem words and phrases.

Achtemeier, Paul J., General Editor. Harper Bible Dictionary. Harper and Row, 1985. Cloth, 1178 pages. This is a wonderful, one volume resource on thousands of topics related to the Bible, from history and archaeology to theology and literature. Well illustrated, with over a hundred different contributors. See especially the article, "John, the gospel according to."

Brown, Raymond E., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary. Prentice Hall, 1990. Cloth, 1475 pages. Probably the best one volume commentary on the entire Bible. See especially "The Gospel According to John," pp. 942-985; and "Johannine Theology," pp. 1417-1426.

Carson, D. A. The Gospel According to John. W. B. Eerdmans, 1991. Cloth, 714 pages. A conservative, detailed, verse by verse commentary.

Countryman, William. The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel: Crossing over into God. Fortress, 1987. Paper, 135 pages. Sees the gospel as focused on progress toward mystical union in Christ. Divides the book up into sections dealing with conversion, baptism, eucharist, enlightenment, and union.

Doohan, Leonard. John: Gospel for a New Age. Bear and Co., 1988. Paper, 198 pages. An easy to read, topical study. The book does not go through the gospel chapter by chapter.

Flanagan, Neal. The Gospel According to John and the Johannine Epistles. Liturgical, 1983. Paper, 128 pages. Includes the text of the gospel and 1, 2, 3 John at the top of the page (New American Bible translation), with notes at the bottom. Emphasizes the dramatic quality of the gospel. Study questions for each chapter at the end of the book.

Grayston, Kenneth. The Gospel of John. Epworth Commentaries. Epworth, 1990. Paper, 177 pages. A paragraph by paragraph commentary.

Harrington, Daniel J. John's Thought and Theology--An Introduction. Michael Glazier, 1990. Paper, 115 pages. A short commentary in four sections. Brief bibliography at the end.

Kysar, Robert. John. Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament. Augsburg, 1986. Paper, 330 pages. A verse by verse commentary with a 14 page introduction to the gospel.

Kysar, Robert. John's Story of Jesus. Fortress, 1984. Paper, 96 pages. Emphasis is on the gospel as a story, with special attention to the plot of the gospel. Brief section by section analysis of the book.

Lindars, Barnabas. John. New Testament Guides. JSOT Press, 1990. Paper, 100 pages. An introduction to important historical and theological issues in the gospel. Brief bibliography at the end of each chapter.

Marsh, John. Saint John. Pelican New Testament Commentaries. Penguin Books, 1968. Paper, 687 pages. A verse by verse commentary with a 90 page introduction.

Smith, D. Moody. John. Proclamation Commentaries. Second edition. Fortress, 1986. Paper, 144 pages. Detailed analysis of select texts, 20 page introduction to the gospel, with a special concluding chapter on the gospel as "literature."

CHAPTER ONE: A Rim with a View

Reading Assignment: Before you begin this study, read the entire Gospel of John through quickly, trying to catch the main points of the story and some central concerns of the book. Read the prologue through two additional times (Jn 1:1-18).

Questions on the text:

- 1) What scene or character in the Gospel (other than Jesus) is most memorable to you? Why?
- 2) What words of Jesus, if any, do you remember most vividly from your reading of the Gospel? Why?
- 3) What metaphors from the prologue do you find most curious, problematical, nurturing, or provocative? Why?

Have you ever followed a trail to the edge of a deep canyon or mountain valley and stood there looking down at the path ahead as it disappears below you? My son and I had a lot of experiences like this a few summers ago up in the North Cascades of Washington. He was six years old at the time, and we went on numerous hikes during the two weeks we spent together at a conference center hidden away in a high mountain valley. After one especially steep and exhausting climb beside a roaring glacier-fed stream, we broke out of the trees and found ourselves in the open, with a cliffside view of the valley below. We paused to catch our breath and traced with our eyes the trail below us as it disappeared into the trees. Sometimes we caught a glimpse of it poking its shy head out from the rocky slope, or saw its twitching tail on a switchback, exposed briefly in the sunlight. We congratulated ourselves with all the work we had done to get to where we were.

You may not have had the experience of hiking high on some secluded mountain trail and seeing the path off in the hazy distance, yet I believe that anyone who reads the first eighteen verses John's gospel is invited to share a similar breath-taking view. We begin this gospel's story with a preview, from the lofty perspective of a prologue, with a panoramic perspective on events about to unfold. But not all of the trail is exposed; not all the elements of the gospel's plot are revealed; not all the characters are unveiled. Yet, like that North Cascades hiking trail, John's prologue gives its readers a degree of confidence and enough of a glimpse of the future story that they feel they know what is ahead and can avoid some of the major obstacles blocking various characters' paths.

Over the next ten chapters you, the reader, will be exploring the Fourth Gospel as though it were taking you on a journey—a journey further up and further in to the Christian experience

and the community of which you are becoming a part. The metaphor or image of life as a journey is as old as literature itself, and I think it is also appropriate to John. In John's gospel Jesus makes a number of trips to Jerusalem, and it is on his return from one of them that he stops beside a well near Sychar and has a memorable conversation with a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-45). But as many have noted, there is a higher, overarching journey that is leading Jesus, the Son, back to his Father (Jn 3:13-14; 16:28; 17:11; 20:17).

The journey image is found as early as the Gilgamesh Epic of third millennium BCE Babylon, a story parallel to, but older than the biblical flood story of Genesis 6. There, the hero Utnapishtim searches the world over for a plant that will give him immortality. Life as a journey is echoed in the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph (Genesis 11-50), who leave their ancestral lands to find new vistas of undreamed possibilities. It is then paralleled by the nation of Israel itself, as God leads the people out from bondage in Egypt to the freedom of their promised land. And in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Israel's journey becomes the model for understanding the invasion, conquest, and subjugation of the Americas, the "New World" and the "New Canaan."

We also find the same metaphor in Homer's tales of brave Odysseus' watery travels and Vergil's Aeneas who eventually settles on the shores of Latium after the fall of Troy. Similarly, in all four gospels Jesus himself is constantly a man on the move. In an image standardized by Mark and picked up in Matthew and Luke, Jesus' life is dominated by one goal: a journey toward death in Jerusalem. The author of Acts uses Jesus' journey to Jerusalem as a model for Paul's journey to Rome, and much later later, the journey will become an allegory of the Christian life in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. The list of examples could go on and on.

But if personal experience and literature teach us anything, it is that our own individual, autobiographical life-journeys are not exclusively private affairs. Our journeys also intersect with other people's paths at peculiar places, sometimes running parallel to them for miles, only suddenly to veer and join up with some old overgrown trail nearly lost to recent memory. Ours are always journeys in company, in community; or as the book of Hebrews likes to put it, "We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1).

If the Fourth Gospel can be viewed as a story that takes its readers on a journey, it too, is surrounded by a "cloud of witnesses"—or at least by three other witnesses in the New Testament—the so-called Synoptic Gospels. These are Matthew, Mark and Luke, who are John's older siblings, having been written before the Fourth Gospel. They are traveling companions, on the same path, but each with a slightly different perspective of the journey. And if one begins with Mark, which is no doubt the earliest gospel and the leader out front, and then reads Matthew or Luke, it seems as though Mark has already told most of the story.

But John is different. It doesn't seem to fit the mold of its older siblings. In many ways it seems to follow a different trail, charging off into the brush where no one had been before. In fact it is so different, that some have called it the "maverick gospel;" that unbranded horse which no one can tame, running wild and free across the plains.

There are a number of elements in John's story of Jesus that reflect its maverick character. And sometimes one may be surprised, perplexed, or perhaps even shocked at the extent to which John is different from the Synoptics. For example, in the Gospel of John Jesus' public ministry seems to last at least two and a half or three years, and he makes at least four trips to Jerusalem (Jn 2:13-3:21; 5:1-47; 7:1-10:39; 12:12-20:29). How do we know the length of his ministry? Because there are three Passovers mentioned in the Gospel (Jn 3:13; 6:4; 12:1), and Passover is a festival that comes only once a year. The Synoptic Gospels, on the other hand, seem to imply that Jesus had a one year public ministry and only one journey to Jerusalem. They mention only one Passover, when, at the end of his life, Jesus travels to Jerusalem and eats the festival meal with his disciples (Mk 14:1). Moreover, in John's Gospel, Jesus' final meal with his disciples (Jn 13:1-30) can't be Passover, because he is already dead when Passover comes. He dies on the day of Preparation, the day before Passover (Jn 18:28; 19:31-37, 42).

Only in the Fourth Gospel do we discover that Jesus' and John's preaching and baptizing activities overlap (Jn 3:22-26). But one reads in the Gospel of Mark that only after John was arrested, did Jesus come into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God (Mk 1:14). Again, in the Synoptic Gospels, after Jesus makes his "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem (Mk 11:1-11), he goes and overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple courtyard (Mk 11:15-19). This event happens during the last week of his life. But in John's Gospel, Jesus' disruptive activity in the temple courtyard is placed near the beginning of the story (Jn 2:13-25). Clearly, there are some significant differences between John and the Synoptics in the sequence and arrangement of events.

But the differences don't stop there. John and the Synoptics also differ widely in their portrayal of Jesus' ministry. If people were asked to name one thing that Jesus talked about, most would mention the kingdom of God. If Jesus taught about anything, it was the kingdom of God. And Mark, Matthew, and Luke seem to substantiate this. In Mark, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:15; cf., Mt 4:17; 5:3; Lk 4:43), and some of his last words have to do with the kingdom of God (Mk 12:34; 14:25). "Kingdom of God" language is found throughout the Synoptic Gospels, and quite often in the context of parables (Mk 4:1-33; Mt 13:1-50; Lk 13:18-21). But in John's Gospel Jesus talks about the kingdom only twice: Once on his own initiative, in conversation with Nicodemus (Jn 3:3-5), and once in response to Pilate's direct question (Jn 18:36).

Moreover, John's Jesus never speaks in parables. The closest he gets to one is his story of the good shepherd (Jn 10:1-18) which the author calls a "figure of speech" (Jn 10:6). Yet in scene after scene of John's gospel Jesus is found teaching. What then is he teaching about, if not the kingdom of God? And how does he teach, if not in parables? In John's Gospel, Jesus' teaching is found in lengthy monologues (e.g., Jn 5:19-47) which revolve around his identity and authority. Although it is somewhat simplistic to say, one might describe Jesus' teaching in the Synoptics as "God centered" and in John's Gospel as "self-centered." This is why one finds Jesus' famous "I am" sayings only in John (Jn 4:26; 6:20, 35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 58; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14, 36, 38; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5; 18:5, 6).

Although John and the Synoptics may differ over their chronology, their arrangement of events, and their portrayal of Jesus' teaching, one would think that they ought to share a common interest in the miracles of Jesus. Surely they must trace a similar path for Jesus in this most important area. Mark's Gospel opens with Jesus entering a synagogue on the Sabbath and casting a demon out of a man (Mk 1:21-28), and throughout this earliest gospel the reader finds Jesus exorcising demons, healing people, and performing all kind of wonderful acts. Many times Mark and the other two Synoptics simply summarize Jesus' many miraculous deeds (Mk 1:32-34, 39; Mt 4:23-24; Lk 5:15). But while the Gospel of John does narrate seven miracles (usually called signs; Jn 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-15; 6:1-14, 16-21; 9:1-12; 11:1-44), there are no exorcisms and no summaries of Jesus's mighty deeds. Certainly Jesus must have eaten with the socially ostracized, including tax collectors. The Synoptics have numerous stories like this (Mk 2:15-17; Mt 9:9-13; Lk 5:27-32). But not the gospel of John. Jesus does eat a few meals, but he is never described as sitting down with tax collectors and "sinners." Neither the despised tax collectors nor the elite, priestly Sadducees inhabit John's story.

From these few examples it should be clear that many of the things that we normally think of as natural elements of Jesus' ministry simply aren't in John's Gospel. John is unusual; a maverick. As the gospel carries the reader along on Jesus' numerous journeys—and ultimately on his cosmic return to God (Jn 16:28)—it marches to the beat of a different drummer.

So there are four Gospels in the New Testament. The three Synoptics are quite similar, and the fourth, John, is quite different from the others. Yet all four Gospels begin their stories of Jesus in very different ways. From the perspective of modern readers, Mark, the earliest, has perhaps the most unusual beginning point. Mark calls his book, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1). For him, that beginning has to do with a person named John, who, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, appears in the wilderness preaching and baptizing (Mk 1:2-15). In Mark, Jesus bursts on the scene as a fully grown adult of unnamed parentage, connected only to a heavenly voice that proclaims him as "Son" (Mk 1:11).

But Matthew can do better. The first Gospel begins with a genealogy that starts with Abraham and ends with Jesus. The hero has an impeccable pedigree (Mt 1:1-17). But the real story begins when Joseph discovers that the woman he is intending to marry is already pregnant—and he knows he isn't the child's father (Mt 1:18-25). It is not an auspicious beginning for the one called Jesus, Immanuel (Mt 1:21, 23), but appearances can be deceiving! And what about Luke's starting place? Certainly the third Gospel can improve on these other beginnings! After setting forth his qualifications and intentions (Lk 1:1-4), the author begins his story with Zechariah, the priestly father of John the baptizer, who meets the angel Gabriel beside the altar of incense in the Jerusalem temple (Lk 1:5-23). There Zechariah discovers that his elderly wife Elizabeth is going to give birth to a son who will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lk 1:17). So the Synoptic Gospels, while similar in many ways, begin their stories of Jesus in significantly different places.

John's Gospel, however, outdoes them all. It begins with the beginning. "In the beginning," to be exact. It is the same opening phrase that one finds in the book of Genesis. Surely one couldn't find a better beginning than that! But each Gospel opens with an echo of the

sacred Scriptures of Judaism, those 39 books that will eventually become the Christian Old Testament. Mark quotes Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 right at the start (Mk 1:2-3), and Matthew begins with “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1). Luke, not to be outdone, writes in a style reminiscent of 1 and 2 Samuel, connecting his characters Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk 1:5-7) with the priestly families of Abijah (1 Chron 24:10) and Aaron (Num 3:1-10). So John is not unique in drawing connections to Jewish sacred writings. But in John’s Gospel the images from Genesis continue on past the opening sentence, getting more complicated as they go. We also read about “all things coming into being” (Jn 1:3, 10; cf., Gen 1:31), about life (Jn 1:4; cf., Gen 1:20-28), and about light (Jn 1:4-5, 9-10; cf., Gen 1:4-5).

In two other echoes of Jewish scriptures, we find Moses and the Law mentioned in Jn 1:17 (cf., Ex 19:20-20:21), and an allusion to the ancient Hebrew sacred tent, or tabernacle of God’s presence, which was routinely set up by the Israelites during their desert wanderings (Jn 1:14; cf., Ex 26:1; 40:1, 34; Num 7:89; 25:6). This allusion rarely comes across clearly in English translations, for it is hidden away in Jn 1:14 where we read, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” The word translated “lived” is an unusual word in Greek, a word that literally means “to pitch a tent.” It is the same word used in the Greek translation of Exodus and Numbers for pitching the sacred tent of God’s presence.

The author thus prepares the reader for his story by alluding to another, older story that precedes it. And we will not be able to fully understand John’s story without some awareness of the other story that has gone before. For our author, that older story is the Hebrew people’s story, a story that has its roots in creation itself.

Similarly, our own spiritual journeys often have their forerunners and precursors. And it is not unusual for us to make sense out of our experiences by relating them to other people’s experiences. Like the Fourth Gospel, your spiritual journey may have received its form and shape from someone else’s story—that of a mother, father, friend, or sibling. You may have responded positively or negatively to that story, and perhaps even now you are walking in its shade or shadow. I believe that in the way John’s Gospel evokes Israel’s ancient story, we are being told that neither Jesus’ journey nor ours exist in isolation. And just as the author of the Fourth Gospel wrestles with fitting Jesus into the story that he has inherited, so also we must struggle with the connections between others’ stories and our own.

In the prologue of John, the echoes of the ancient Hebrew creation myth, the desert wanderings of Israel, and the giving of the law are all somehow related to a mysterious being called “the Word”—who, surprisingly, is not found in any of those old stories. The origin of this “Word” creature, whose gender is masculine in Greek, is connected to the one and only God (Jn 1:1-2). He is also described as life (Jn 1:4) and light (Jn 1:9-10). It is this “Word” to whom John bears witness; who becomes flesh and “pitches a tent among us” (Jn 1:14). In John 1:10-13 the “Word” character comes to his own people, is rejected by them, but then empowers those who “believe in his name.” But what is the character’s name? It is a double name: Jesus, Christ (Jn 1:17), revealed just moments before the prologue discloses that this same Word/Life/Light/Jesus/Christ is God’s very child, the only Son, “who has made God known” (Jn

1:18).

There are three central characters in the prologue: God, the Word, and John. Although John is the first personal name that appears in the Gospel, he is barely a character here. His function is simply to bear witness to the Word (Jn 1:7-8, 15). He will be a major focus of our attention in the next chapter, for he will play a central role in getting the story off the ground (Jn 1:19-36). Of these three characters, the confusing Word/Life/Light/Jesus/Christ/Son creature is the one that dominates the prologue. Its plot is his story. He is the one who comes into the world (Jn 1:9) and becomes flesh (Jn 1:14). It is he who comes to his own people and is rejected by them (Jn 1:10-11), before returning to God (Jn 1:18). And although the plot may be simple, the character's many-sided descriptions are often difficult for modern readers to understand and follow. Nevertheless, these images are deeply rooted in ancient Jewish traditions. We will need to do some unpacking of them before we come back once again to the issue of plot.

The association of the Word with creation (Jn 1:1-5) probably has its source in Jewish speculation about the source of wisdom. In ancient Hebrew, "wisdom" is a feminine noun ("hokmah"), which is sometimes personified as a female counterpart of God "created at the beginning of [God's] work, the first of his acts long ago" (Prov 8:22; cf., 8:1), who "came forth from the mouth of the Most High and covered the earth like a mist" (Sirach 24:3; cf., Gen 1:2). The author of the Wisdom of Solomon, writing a little over a hundred years before the Gospel of John was written, describes this wisdom as "the fashioner of all things" (Wis 7:22; cf., Jn 1:3, 10), who, as "a breath of the power of God (cf., Gen 1:2) and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (Wis 7:26; cf., Jn 1:14), is a "reflection of eternal light" (Wis 7:26; cf., Jn 1:5, 7-9). This same wisdom travels with the Hebrew people throughout their wilderness wanderings (Wis 11:1-14; Sir 24:10; cf., Jn 1:14).

No doubt the roots of this understanding of wisdom are to be found in speculation over the first Hebrew words of the Bible: "be/reshith" ("in the beginning"). We know that Jewish rabbis often argued over the proper interpretation of these two words, sometimes translating them "With the firstborn creature, God created . . .," rather than "In the beginning God created. . . ." Both of these are legitimate translations of the Hebrew. But when translating Genesis 1:1 "With the firstborn," the rabbis presumed that the firstborn creature was Wisdom. Wisdom, that feminine creature, was like a blueprint or computer operating system. She was the code by whom and through whom God created the world. Those who were wise enough could decipher her code, analyze her system, and learn from her how to live rightly. She was the Torah. She was Law (Sir 24:23).

In trying to describe Jesus' uniqueness as a human being, some early Christians—perhaps first at Corinth—began to speak of Christ as "the Wisdom of God." And so Wisdom's associations continued to expand. Paul seems to borrow this expression from them and use it in his letter to them (1 Cor 1:24). Then later on, the writer to the church of Colossae picks up the language of wisdom speculation when he quotes a hymn that describes the Messiah as "the firstborn of all creation . . . [who] is before all things and in [whom] all things hold together" (Col 1:15, 17). It may be through a hymn such as this that John's prologue comes to identify Jesus, the messiah, as the Word who was "with God in the beginning" (Jn 1:1-2).

Strangely, however, the term “Word” is never again applied to Jesus in John’s Gospel. Jesus will identify himself as “Light” (Jn 8:12; 9:5), as “Son” (Jn 5:19-24), and as “Life” (Jn 11:25), but he will never say “I am the Word.” The Word (“logos” in Greek) that enters the world so powerfully and majestically at the beginning of the book, will sneak out at the end as a “rumor (“logos” in Greek) spread in the community” (Jn 21:23).

It should be obvious by now that a lot of speculation and complicated connections lie behind the Word figure in the prologue. And one can imagine how the later Church could turn to these opening verses of John and use them as a rich resource for defining more carefully how Jesus was related to God. But my purpose is not to discuss those later theological debates here. The crucial point for us is simply to recognize three important things: 1) the Word character is complex, and not easily understood or deciphered; 2) he is the central character in the prologue; 3) he has a certain story, or “plot.”

Having examined the Jewish background of the Word/Life/Light/ Jesus/Christ/Son figure, we can turn once again to the prologue’s plot—a plot in which this figure is so central. But what clues about the story’s plot do we collect from reading the prologue? If John 1:1-18 really is a prologue, it ought to tell us something about the story that is ahead. What glimpses or signposts of that trail do we get from it? Are there any barriers or obstacles to our view? Are there things that the prologue doesn’t tell us about the story to follow?

The setting for the story is perhaps the most vague element of the prologue. The author simply says that the Word/Light came into the world (Jn 1:9-10), “came to what was his own” (Jn 1:11), and “lived among us” (Jn 1:14). That is fairly unspecific! There are only two places mentioned: the place where God is (Jn 1:1-2, 18) and the world, where we are (Jn 1:10-11, 14). This is a lot different from the Gospels of Mark and Luke. In Mark, the reader is placed immediately in the desert with John, with people coming from the whole Judean countryside and Jerusalem to be baptized by him in the Jordan river (Mk 1:4-5). In Luke, within a few sentences we are standing beside Zechariah, inside the temple (Lk 1:8-11). The beginning of John’s Gospel gives the reader no such clues regarding the story’s setting.

But what about the prologue’s plot? Do we have any clues as to what will happen to the Word/Life/Light/Jesus/Christ/Son? Here the author puts us on more solid ground. Some have suggested, and I think rightly so, that the prologue’s structure and plot is like a pendulum. It begins on the heights, describing the Word’s relationship with God (Jn 1:1-5). Then it swings down to the earth, as the Word/Light enters the world, comes to his own, takes on human flesh, and lives among us (Jn 1:9-17). In verse 18 we find the pendulum swinging high again, with the son close to the heart of the father.

However, there are also two other important movements in the prologue. One is a movement from the impersonal to the personal. At the beginning we find God and the Word associated together, but by the end this association is described as a father/son relationship, with one “close to the heart” of the other. Along the way, this Word takes on the name “Jesus” and lives—not “on earth,” but “among us” (Jn 1:14). The other movement in the prologue is from

stability to conflict, and back to stability once more. Again, the stability is evident in the God/Word, father/son relationship found in the opening and closing. The conflict is seen in the light/darkness, law/grace oppositions (Jn 1:5, 17), the rejection of the Word by “his own people” (Jn 1:11), and the gift given to those who “received him” (Jn 1:12, 16).

Putting all this together, we have a plot that can be summarized thus: Divine Wisdom makes a journey to earth, where it takes on flesh and bones in Jesus. While here, among us, a prophet named John witnesses to Jesus’ divine origin. Jesus provokes controversy, but those who “believe in his name” (i.e., believe that he has come from God), are empowered with God’s “fullness.” The plot is finally resolved when Jesus, divine wisdom and unique son, returns to his father.

But there are still many unresolved questions in this plot. Are they, perhaps, purposely placed obstacles, barriers, and blind spots, to challenge us in our own spiritual journeys? For example, we are not explicitly told who it is that opposes Jesus, except that this opposition may involve powers beyond the human realm (Jn 1:5). We are not given a hint as to how strong this opposition will be (nothing is mentioned of his death), nor is there any explicit information as to who “his own people” are. And while the references to Moses and the Law would imply that his own people are Jews, his return to God’s presence is as mysterious as his original leave taking.

So who will be on the accepting side in this story? Who will be on the rejecting side? As we travel through John’s Gospel we will discover that often those characters who we think are or should be the accepting ones, turn out to be the rejecting ones. And, vice versa, characters who initially seem to reject Jesus may end up to be those who accept him. Characters who look like insiders can become outsiders. Characters we expect to be on the outside end up on the inside.

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to show how the prologue of the Fourth Gospel functions as a rim. A rim with a view. From its rim we get a perspective on the story to follow; the path that lies ahead. The view can give us a sense of confidence and assurance, for we know some of what is in store for us. But as we learned from a careful look at the prologue’s plot, it doesn’t disclose everything. Not every pitfall can be seen from its lofty perspective, not all the detours are marked with clear signs. The joy of John’s journey, then, will only come in the reading. So let’s begin!

Questions along the Way:

- 1) Where was the beginning of your spiritual journey?
- 2) Who or what have been the important precursors, the predecessors to your spiritual journey?
- 3) What gifts of empowerment have you been given for your spiritual journey?
- 4) What is your spiritual journey about? What is its plot?