John

Lesson #20

Final Thoughts
Review

John’s gospel ended with chapter 20, but one issue lingered, unresolved: Peter’s denial. The synoptic gospels do not address it, but John’s does. Peter was leader among the twelve, and with Jesus’ resurrection and ascension he plays a key role in the birth and growth of the Church, preaching his first sermon with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, A.D. 32 (Acts 2: 14-41), at which 3,000 people are “saved.”

When we left Peter, however, he was utterly devastated by his denial of Christ. Judas had betrayed Jesus, and he hanged himself as a result, but what of Peter? How do we get him back? John offered a brilliant narrative on Peter’s “reinstatement,” a narrative so subtle and psychologically insightful that it was dazzling to read.
Finishing our study of Matthew, Mark, Luke/Acts and John brings us to a major milestone in our verse-by-verse bible study. In our final lesson on John’s gospel we review what we’ve covered, emphasizing that a gospel is _not_ an historical account of a person, although it is rooted in historical time; it is _not_ a fictional account of a person, although it does include miracles, wonders and the large dose of the supernatural; rather, a “gospel” is an account of the “good news” of the coming Kingdom of God and of the redemption of humanity through the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, _as seen through the eyes of a living faith tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit, 30-60 years after the events it portrays._

In Lesson 20 we revisit the authorship, audience and purpose of each gospel account, recalling how each gospel is written, how each differs stylistically, and how each gospel develops its own point of view and perspective on the gospel message. We close by laying a foundation for our study of 1, 2 and 3 John and Revelation.
Having studied all four gospels (and Acts), we have a detailed, 3-dimensional portrait of Christ, but it’s not a complete one. As the four gospels portray the person and work of Christ—as understood by four different faith communities in the second half of the first century—so does the Holy Spirit continue to guide us and deepen our understanding of Christ through the teaching of his Church, until this very day.
After Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection he said to his Apostles:

“All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

Matthew 28: 18-20

And that is precisely what they did.
1. For three years (A.D. 29-32) Jesus “went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and curing every disease and illness among the people” (Luke 4: 23).

2. During his 3-year public ministry Jesus gathered many followers, twelve of whom became his “inner circle,” his Apostles. They lived with him, traveled with him, studied with him: they were eyewitneses to his public ministry and to his death, burial and resurrection.
3. After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his inner circle to go and “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28: 19-20).

4. His Apostles did exactly that, becoming his “witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth [i.e., throughout the Roman Empire]” (Acts 1: 8).
5. Jesus’ Apostles—and his other followers—traveled throughout the Roman Empire telling stories about him: they repeated his teaching; they told about his encounters with the religious authorities; and they told about the miracles God performed through him.

6. Over time, this oral teaching and preaching took on a fixed form and shape through repetition: expository teaching (e.g., Sermon on the Mount), parables (e.g., the Prodigal Son); dialectic (argumentation); healing stories; etc.
Between A.D. 32 and the mid 60s, teaching and preaching about Jesus was primarily *oral*, with occasional letters, such as those written by Paul. Faith communities formed throughout the Roman Empire based on such teaching and preaching.
By the mid-60s, however, the eyewitness generation was drawing to a close—either through natural death or persecution. Jesus had not yet returned—as he said he would—so it became imperative that the oral teaching and preaching about Jesus be written down, lest it be distorted or lost.
There were many “gospels” written during the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} centuries A.D., but the gospels we address are the canonical gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

These are the gospels the early church believed were written by the Apostles (Matthew and John) or someone closely associated with the Apostles (Mark and Luke)—\textit{during the first generation of the Church}. 

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Matthew, a tax collector, left his work to follow Jesus (Matthew 9: 9-13). One of the twelve apostles, he was a Jew—probably a Levite—and he wrote for a Jewish audience.

His written gospel emerges sometime in the late 60s.
John Mark, a young man, was not an Apostle, but he was on the fringes of the group that followed Jesus. He is first mentioned in Acts 12:12—"When this dawned on him [Peter], he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.”

Mark was a nephew of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and the spiritual son of Peter (1 Peter 5:13).

Mark probably writes the 1st gospel sometime in the early to mid 60s, addressing it to the persecuted church in Rome, a predominantly Gentile church.

Luke was not an Apostle—nor was he a follower of Jesus during Jesus’ three-year public ministry. Rather, Luke, the “beloved physician” was a Gentile, a close friend and traveling companion of Paul during A.D. 50-68. Luke wrote both the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. He addresses both works to a Gentile named Theophilus.

Final Thoughts
Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the *synoptic* Gospels:

*Syn* = “together” (as in “synonym”)

*Optic* = “seen”

They all draw from the same oral (and perhaps) written sources.
The Synoptic Gospels
Matthew, Mark & Luke

Matthaean Source

Mark (c. 60-65)
“Q” Document
Lucan Source

Proto-Luke

Matthew (c. 65-70)
Luke (c. 70-75)
John is **very** different from the synoptic gospels, drawing on an **entirely** different set of traditions.
John was an Apostle, the son of Zebedee and Salome, the brother of James and one of Jesus’ cousins. Of all the Apostles, John was the most intimate with Jesus. He is the “beloved disciple” who rests his head on Jesus’ shoulder at the last supper and the one to whom Jesus entrusts the care of his mother, Mary, as he is dying on the cross. Traditionally, John is the author of the Gospel according to John; 1, 2 & 3 John and Revelation.

The “Johannine canon” is written sometime in the mid-80s through the mid-to-late 90s.
The New Testament was written entirely in koine Greek, that is, the “common” Greek understood by ordinary people living in Palestine at the time of Jesus. They understood Greek because Alexander the Great had conquered the region in 331 B.C., establishing a long period of Greek rule that lasted until the Roman general, Pompey, conquered the area in 63 B.C. A Jew living in Palestine at the time of Jesus would have understood Greek, spoken Aramaic as his native language, and been able to read Hebrew. Most would also have had a working knowledge of Latin, since they were living under Roman rule.
Although the events in the New Testament happen in the first century A.D., the manuscripts that record those events date from much later. Manuscripts of the New Testament are divided into four types: papyri, uncials, minuscules, and lectionaries.
Example of a Papyrus Manuscript

This is the oldest existing manuscript of the New Testament, a fragment of the Gospel according to John, A.D. 125 (John 18: 31-34; 37-38).
Example of an Uncial Manuscript

Example of a Miniscule Manuscript

This is a parchment manuscript from the 10th century containing the Acts of the Apostles, and the general and Pauline letters (Philemon 10-25 is shown above). Mt. Athos, Greece.
Example of a Lectionary

This is a parchment codex containing a gospel lectionary dated A.D. 991. It is carefully written with elaborate decorative letters in yellow, blue, green and scarlet. The text is John 19: 10-16 and Matthew 27: 3-5. Vatican Library.

Final Thoughts
As the early Church spread throughout the Roman Empire in the second half of the first century, the teaching and preaching of the Apostles and others brought the gospel message to an enormously diverse audience of both Jew and Gentile, spread geographically from Jerusalem, Damascus and Antioch in the east; Alexandria, Cyrene and Carthage in the south; Mauretania, Spain and Gaul in the west; and St. Paul’s mission field of Asia Minor, Macedonia, Achaia and Rome in the north.
Importantly, as we have studied the gospels we have learned that a “gospel” is **not** a biography of a person, although it does contain biographical information; it is **not** an historical account of a person, although it is rooted in historical time; it is **not** a fictional account of a person, although it does include miracles, wonders and the large dose of the supernatural; rather, a “gospel” is an account of the “good news” of the coming Kingdom of God and of the redemption of humanity through the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, *as seen through the eyes of a living faith tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit, 30-60 years after the events it portrays.*

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Hundreds of “church” communities took root throughout the Roman Empire in the fertile soil of the gospel message, but each of those communities experienced and lived that message within its own historical, political and cultural context. Although the core gospel message was the same, each community experienced and understood that message differently: a highly educated, urban community in Carthage or Ephesus, for example, might view the gospel very differently from one in an pre-literate, remote agricultural area of eastern Cappadocia.
I always thought the early church was the “pure” church. Silly me!

So, there was really no “orthodox” belief in the early church; rather, there was extreme diversity, with each community, developing its own traditions and understanding.
It’s important to understand, as well, that there were hundreds of “Christian” works written during the first three centuries of the Church, so which ones should be considered “scripture,” by what criteria, and by what communities was an open question.

St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter letter of A.D. 367, offered a list of the 27 books that would later become the “New Testament,” and he used the term “canonized” [κανονιζόμενα] in reference to them.

Then, when Pope St. Damasus commissioned St. Jerome to translate the 27 Greek “scriptures” into Latin in A.D. 383, that added to their standing.

Finally, in A.D. 393 the Council of Hippo, called by St. Augustine, officially recognized the 27 books offered by St. Athanasius and translated by Jerome as “canonical Scripture”—which they are to this day.
Wow! We didn’t even have a “bible” (as we know it) for the first 300 years of the church!

And what churches did have was piecemeal—a book here, a book there.

So, it took a long time for the 27 books of the New Testament to be recognized as “canonical.”
And it took an even longer time for the Church to agree upon an understanding of the key issues in those books.

Especially the issue of who Jesus is and what he did!
Consequently, each Christian community experienced and lived the gospel message through its own interpretative lens. It wouldn’t be until the 4th century that a series of seven Ecumenical Councils (A.D. 325-787) began defining precisely who Christ is and what he did, in a manner that most church communities could agree upon.

1. 1st Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325)
2. 1st Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381)
3. Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431)
4. Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)
5. 2nd Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553)
6. 3rd Council of Constantinople (A.D. 680)
7. 2nd Council of Nicaea (A.D. 787)
When we move from the synoptic gospels to John’s gospel, we enter a different universe, a community of people who thought very differently from those who crafted the synoptic gospels!

In John’s gospel Jesus does not speak in neat aphorisms or clever parables as he does in the synoptic gospels, nor does he engage the Pharisees and Sadducees in clever banter; rather, Jesus settles into long discourses, heavy with theological content and weighty with abstract metaphors like “life,” “light,” and “truth,” all combined in complex patterns with “seeing,” “believing” and “knowing.”
Whereas, in the synoptic gospels Jesus speaks of the coming Kingdom of God, in John’s gospel the Kingdom of God has already come in the person of the divine Word, of Jesus himself.

In John, Jesus self-referential speech illuminates a fundamental, metaphysical dualism: humanity faces a choice between what is from above and what is from below; what is light and what is dark; what is true and what is false; what is life and what is death.

Jesus himself intersects this dualistic universe like “Jacob’s ladder” intersects heaven and earth in Genesis 28. Jesus is the one who comes down from heaven to reveal himself and to reveal the Father, and when he finishes his work, he returns to heaven and to the Father.
In John’s gospel Jesus is God.

That’s certainly not the case in Matthew, Mark and Luke.
In the past, many scholars thought that such a “high” Christology must have been greatly influenced by later Platonic thought and developed over a long period of time, suggesting that John’s gospel was written perhaps during the 2nd or even the 3rd century A.D.

But with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1946-1956, we know that this dualistic world view so prominent in John’s gospel was even more sharply present in the writings from Qumran, which were contemporary with Jesus himself.
The Qumran “War Scroll” presents an apocalyptic vision of an end-time, cataclysmic war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. In the end, the Sons of Darkness are destroyed and the Sons of Light live in peace for all eternity.

Add to that, the fragment that we’ve already seen of John’s gospel discovered in Egypt in the 1920s, which is dated c. A.D. 125, demonstrating that John’s gospel was completed sometime around the end of the 1st century or beginning of the 2nd.

Final Thoughts
So, that suggests that the “high” Christology we see in the Johannine canon *co-existed* with the understanding of Christ that we see in the synoptic gospels!

Wow! That demonstrates just how diverse thinking was among the early Christians!
And that, of course, created considerable tension in the early church, with individual communities developing their own “orthodoxy,” while criticizing and excluding other communities as “heretical.”

And this tension emerges as early as the 2nd half of the 1st century!
Professor Luke Timothy Johnson observes:

“Whatever the precise nature of the disputes, any sort of division would be a severe crisis for a church that lived within the symbolic framework we have seen in [John’s gospel]. The farewell discourse of Jesus (John 15: 1 – 17: 26) portrays a community of friends. They share in one Spirit, being joined to Jesus as Jesus is to the Father, in a fellowship of unity and love. For a community with such a self-understanding, any dissension and deviance would be difficult to understand and assimilate. But a clash over the right understanding of Jesus, and a division leading to mutual excommunication, would challenge this community’s very identity and existence.”

And that’s precisely what we observe as we move from John’s gospel to his epistle and two letters: 1, 2 and 3 John—and then onward to Revelation.
Questions for discussion and thought

1. If the gospel message moved throughout the Roman Empire primarily through oral teaching and preaching, wouldn’t you expect the stories to evolve over time, ultimately bearing little resemblance to the original?

2. Why did the gospel stories move from oral teaching and preaching to written form?

3. What is the earliest written example of a gospel text?

4. How did the church eventually define the “core beliefs” of Christianity?

5. When were the 27 books of the New Testament canon officially recognized as “scripture”?

Final Thoughts