

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART III

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE FIRST DAYS (JOHN 1:19-42)

I. After the prologue, the Gospel proceeds along to a series of either six or seven days, which seems to harken back to the days of creation in Genesis.

A. The progression goes from the ministry of John the Baptist to the call of the disciples and building of the early Church to the reestablishment of the primordial order at the wedding in Cana.

B. The phrase "the next day" connects the first four or five days (depending on the reading), reflecting the structure of Genesis. The actions are always during the daylight, indicating the light of Christ coming into the darkness, a later theme of the Gospel. See, e.g., John 3:19-21:12-14, 9:39

- In Judaic timing a day would begin at sunset.

C. The fifth and sixth days (or possibly just the sixth day) are skipped, with the wedding feast occurring on "the third day," a phrase that prefigures the resurrection occurring on "the third day." See, e.g., Luke 9:22, 18:33. See also Hos. 6:2. The sixth day may well have been skipped because the Gospel itself answers what would happen on the sixth day, i.e., the death of Christ, which would bring about the recreation of humanity. The Gospel may be skipping two days in these first accounts, rather than just one, for two days of silence, anticipating the two days Christ would be in the tomb.

D. The days here should not necessarily be taken as literal twenty four hour time periods.

1. John frequently uses time in a symbolic sense, referring for example to the "hour" of Jesus' death. See, e.g., John 2:4, 7:30, 12:27, 13:1.

2. In addition, if the term day were taken literalistically, Jesus and His early disciples would have gone from the area around the Jordan, where John the Baptists was, up to the Galilee in twenty four hours. That would be possible by miracle, but no such extraordinary sign seems to be implied.

II. The first three or four days reflect the ministry of John the Baptist pointing the way to Christ and the beginning of His new people.

A. On the first day, John disclaims being the Messiah, Elijah or a mysterious prophet spoken of from of old. Instead, he takes on the role of the voice sent by God, reflecting God's word, and anticipating the day of the Lord.

B. Unusual for John, he here distinguishes between the priest and Levites, on the one hand, and the Pharisees on the other. There is an implication of Jewish authorities behind both groups.

1. The priests and Levites ask whether John is one foretold by the prophets, either the Messiah (anointed one) himself, or a prophet who would prepare the way of the Lord. By pointing out that they were from Jerusalem, John is emphasizing the fact that they are the official religious rulers of Judaism according to the law.

a. There were expectations of an anointed one, either of the Davidic (kingly line) or of the Levitic (priestly) line. The priestly questioners were asking about the fulfillment of Hebrew Scriptures themselves.

b. The Messiah would be an anointed one of God who would come again to restore Israel, bring her to greater glory, and inaugurate a worldwide reign of peace and true worship. See, e.g., Isaiah 9:1-6, 11:1-9, Jer 23:3, Ez. 37:23-28; Zech. 6:9ff.; see also, Ps, 2, 100. For the most part, the term "anointed one" referred to in the prophets would be a king. However, because priests were also anointed, and because of Zechariah's prophesy, there were also many views that the Messiah would come of the priestly line. John disclaims this role, indicating that he himself would not bring about this kingdom.

c. Malachi and the Book of Sirach, as well as non-Scriptural literature had foretold of the return of Elijah before the day of the Lord. See Sir. 48:10-12; Mal. 3:24. The priests and Levites were wondering whether he was Elijah, who would prepare for this purifying day of the Lord. Jesus identifies John with at least the spirit of Elijah, but here John seems to disclaim it. See, e.g., Mark 9:13, Matt. 17:12. Part of the idea may be that John spoke with the prophetic voice of Elijah, but not so much exercising power himself, as Elijah did, but rather pointing the way to Christ. In addition, the day of the Lord would be one of harsh cleansing, whereas the Gospel will indicate that it is the rejection of the Lord that leads to this punishment.

d. Moses had spoken of a prophet like himself rising again for Israel to purify the land and give them an image of the

voice of God, for God's voice itself was too much to hear at Mount Sinai. See Duet. 18:15-18. John disclaims this role as well, for the people will be able to hear the voice of God through Jesus Himself.

E. Instead, here John takes on the more positive role of the voice crying out in the desert, preparing the way for the Messiah to restore Israel. The term was taken from the beginning of the prophecies of restoration in Isaiah. See Is. 40:3. Instead, it would seem that Moses was speaking about the prophets generally, or possibly about the use of intermediaries when people are not yet ready for the fullness of truth. See Mark 4:10-12.

2. The Pharisees ask about the ritual baptism that John was using.

a. Baptism is not mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures. However, it was increasingly used around the time of Christ as a symbol of the need to be purified by God in preparation for His kingdom, a purification that the prophets had foretold. See Ezek. 36:25-26; Zech. 12:10-13:3.

B. The Pharisees are the representatives of the teaching authority and the laws of purity among the Jews. They sought to maintain purity by means of strict adherence to the law, and were asking about this source of purifying power.

C. John says that his baptism is of water, a natural symbol of purity. But there is a greater source of purification coming from one greater than himself, who will be introduced on the next day.

C. On the second day, John answers the questions posed by the first day regarding who this one greater than John is. John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God, as the source of the baptism of the Spirit, and as the Son of God. All three ideas will be developed later in the Gospel.

1. In identifying Jesus as "the Lamb of God," the Gospel is indicating that Jesus will fulfill the role of the Passover Lamb, which saved the people of God from the angel of death and provided the meal that would constitute them as the free Chosen People. See Ex. 12:1-28. John will develop this theme both in the bread of Life discourse (showing Jesus Himself as the new food of life) and in describing Jesus' death especially in terms of the Passover. See John 6:22-59, 19:4.

- The lamb could also refer to the suffering servant that Isaiah spoke of, who is led like a lamb to the slaughter, but

who will win a new life for God's people. See Isaiah 53; 1 John 2:2.

2. The Gospel will develop his notion of baptizing (immersing) with the Spirit both in the discourse with Nicodemus in which Jesus speaks of being reborn of water and the Spirit in order to enter into eternal life and in the discourse with the Samaritan woman in which He will speak of the water that gives everlasting life. See John 3:1-15, 4:4-25. The prophets had spoken of a time when the Spirit would come upon the people, now purified in the new era. See, e.g., Is. 44:3; Ezek. 37:27, 37:14; Zech. 10:12; Joel 3.

3. John speaks of Jesus as one whom he did not know before. The other Gospels present the baptism of Jesus in such a way that it seems that John does know Jesus. See Matt. 3:13-27. One solution is that John in general knew who Jesus was, but did not fully comprehend His ministry, especially the new baptism in the Holy Spirit that Jesus would bring, until Jesus Himself was baptized.

4. Finally, John testifies that Jesus is "the Son of God." In the Old Testament, the term as applied to a group or a representative had referred to the angels, the kings, the people of Israel, or the just in general. E.g., Ps. 29:1; Job 1:6; 2 Sam. 7; Hos 11:1; Wis. 3:18. However, here the term is used for Jesus in the individual sense, giving an indication of His divinity, through whom the people of God would become adopted children of God. The Gospels consistently describe the baptism as an occasion for the Spirit coming on Jesus and God identifying Him as His Son. See Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22.

5. This whole day provides a theme of the reconnection of heaven and earth through Jesus.

D. The third day describes the call of the first disciples.

1. John again points out Jesus as the Lamb of God, but this time specifically to two of his disciples, Andrew and very likely John the apostle. As the first day was connected to the second by the theme of baptism, so the second is connected to the third by the theme of the Lamb of God.

2. These disciples apparently sensed the truth John spoke of and then recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of that truth, although their comprehension is only beginning. They begin to follow Jesus, desiring to know more about Him. This theme of honest, but puzzled, inquiry, will continue throughout the Gospel.

- People who are gradually coming to understand Jesus will often refer to Him as "Rabbi" in this Gospel. See, e.g., John 3:2, 4:31, 6:25, 9:2, 11:8. See also John 20:16.

3. Andrew then goes to get his brother Simon Peter.

- It is not clear whether this first example of evangelization occurs late on that day or on the next day. On the one hand, the grammar would indicate it is on the same day, for the next day is mentioned only later. On the other hand, the Greek word for first could mean "next," as in "on the next day." In addition, Andrew first saw Jesus at 4:00 in the afternoon and, by the time he sought out Peter, already recognized Jesus as not only a great teacher, but also the Messiah.

- Andrew is consistently portrayed as the eager evangelist, bringing people to Christ. See John 6:8-9, 12:20-22.

4. The Gospel presents Peter's name right off, rather than waiting for the revelation of this name later, as Matthew does. Jesus does not tell Simon he was the rock at that time, but rather indicates that Simon will be called Peter. As indicated by the Gospel according to Matthew, this transition will occur later at the confession by Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. See Matt. 16:13-20.