

1. LITERARY KEYS TO THE FOURTH GOSPEL

The Symphonic Structure of John

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THE UNIQUE character of the Fourth Gospel is recognized by all students of the New Testament. In spite of the fact that it describes the same Person as the Synoptic Gospels, it narrates new episodes in His life, places Him in other geographical surroundings, reports different discourses, and employs another type of vocabulary. Because of the radical difference between John and the Synoptics, many scholars have concluded that it is unhistorical, and cannot be utilized as a reliable basis for information concerning the life of Jesus.

Divergence of presentation does not necessarily imply conflict, for the variations may be explained in terms of purpose. The writer affirmed that he had a much broader knowledge of the person and work of Jesus than he expressed in his book, but stated that "these signs are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye may have life in his name" (20 :31). His attention was concentrated on the main objective of fostering belief. Around this theme he wove others, important in themselves, and so interrelated that they could be expressed in interchangeable terms, i.e., "the life was the light of men" (1:4). These interwoven themes, fluctuating in emphasis but always progressive in development, lead steadily forward to the climax which consummates them simultaneously, and creates the cumulative incentive to faith.

This type of structure may be called symphonic, from its likeness to the form of a symphony. A symphony is a musical

composition having several movements related in subject, but varying in form and execution. It usually begins with a dominant theme, into which variations are introduced at intervals. The variations seem to be developed independently, but as the music is played, they modulate into each other until finally all are brought to a climax. The apparent disunity is really part of a design which is not evident at first, but which appears in the progress of the composition.

Symphonic structure is difficult to analyze because of its nature. A logical argument, marked by steps of reasoning, can easily be reduced to a categorical outline like a lawyer's brief. While it is possible to outline the Fourth Gospel on the basis of its geographical, chronological, and psychological order, it contains also an elusive element that cannot be completely captured by rigid structural analysis. On the other hand, without an orderly investigation the symphonic elements will never be discerned, because they will remain indistinguishable in the complex mass of the narrative.

It is not within the province of this study to attempt a survey of all the subordinate themes in John which could be included in the symphonic structure. Such an essay might be wearisome or trivial, or both. The main purpose is to demonstrate the nature of symphonic structure, with sufficient detail to illustrate the method and results of the investigation.

The basic clues may be found in the direct statement of purpose appended to the close of the twentieth chapter. Here the main narrative ends, and the author concludes by saying: "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). These words indicate that the central person of the Gospel is Jesus; that the main argument is to prove that He is the Messiah; that the chief support of the argument is in the "signs" which He performed; and that the dominant purpose of writing is to inculcate belief in the readers that they may obtain life in Christ. From these implications are derived the trends of thought that appear in the structure of the Gospel. They are interwoven so that they constitute a unit; yet they are sufficiently distinctive to be

separately identifiable.

The signs come first in the order of the themes suggested by the two verses cited above. Signs are miraculous works performed or mentioned to illustrate spiritual principles. In the development of the Gospel they implement Jesus' words to Nathanael: "Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these" (1:50). Jesus' initial introduction to the disciples, and to Nathanael in particular, had revealed that He exercised supernatural powers of discernment. Because of Jesus' casual remark that he had seen Nathanael under the fig-tree—presumably at his house--and knew what he was doing, Nathanael confessed Jesus to be the Son of God (1:51). The "greater things," which would be even more convincing, must refer to the miracles, which the disciples witnessed afterward, and which fixed their faith in Him.

In the Gospel are seven signs which bear directly upon the development of thought: the changing of water into wine (2:1-11); the healing of the nobleman's son (4:46-54); the healing of the impotent man (5 :1-15); the feeding of the five thousand (6 :1-14); the walking on the water (6:15-2:1); the healing of the blind man (9 :1-41); and the raising of Lazarus (11:1-44). Although these signs occur at irregular intervals, they serve as mileposts in Jesus' career, and are the explicit foundation of belief.

The changing of water into wine brought Jesus into public prominence. He had not hitherto been known in Galilee as a preacher or prophet, and had not exercised miraculous powers. His disciples had accepted Him largely because of John the Baptist's recommendation, confirmed by their personal contacts and observation. Jesus' ability to control the chemical processes of nature induced them to believe on Him with new understanding and fervor. This capability of transforming material substance may be an indication of His ability to change spiritual life. The promise that He would alter Peter's character (1:42), the prescription of new birth for Nicodemus (3:5), and the profound alteration in the attitude of the woman of Samaria (4:28-29) follow the principle latent in this miracle.

Immediately following the discussion of the first sign, John

records Jesus' prediction of His own resurrection. His stress on the Jews' inquiry at the cleansing of the temple, "What sign showest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?" (2:18) implies that the miracles were related to substantiate Jesus' authority. Jesus' reply to the Jewish query by the enigmatic statement, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19), provides a contrast between the first sign and the final great manifestation of power in the resurrection. The first confirmed the disciples' personal allegiance; the last provided a rational theological basis for faith. Between these two poles of demonstrated power are ranged six other miracles, each of which demanded an advance of faith and marked the solution of a new problem.

The healing of the nobleman's son showed that Jesus' powers were not limited by distance, for Capernaum and Cana, where the interview with Jesus took place, were twenty miles apart. The important aspect of the second sign is its demand for choice of an alternative. The first sign required repose while waiting for Jesus to act; the second required an instant decision to trust Him on the basis of His word.

The healing of the impotent man called for a positive act of volition. Asking an invalid who had been confined to his bed for thirty-eight years to stand and carry away his bedroll seemed absurd. Nevertheless Jesus commanded precisely what seemed impossible. When the sick man complied voluntarily, the impossible occurred. The third sign was important because it precipitated the controversy that defined both the claims of Jesus, and the position of His enemies. It crystallized the unbelief of His opponents.

The feeding of the five thousand, and the walking on the water, occurred in close sequence. Both were pivotal to the narrative of John, for they marked a crisis in the faith of the disciples. Convinced of Jesus' power to control the laws of nature, they confessed Him as the Son of God, and avowed lasting belief in Him (6:68-69).

The healing of the blind beggar involved man's relation to "fate." His affliction could not be traced to accident or to misbehavior that would make him directly responsible for his adversity. The disciples could not understand why so unusual, a malady should be causeless, and they asked Jesus whether

the man himself or his parents were to blame. Jesus' reply and His accompanying action indicated that He was more interested in correcting the man's state than He was in explaining it. Having challenged the blind man's faith by action and words, Jesus restored sight by an act of creative power, and transformed his life and destiny.

The raising of Lazarus proved that Christ was able to reverse the current of death and to impart vitality even to a corpse. For the casual crowd of spectators this miracle was the greatest possible evidence of Jesus' supernatural character; to the family at Bethany it involved the most rigorous test of faith that they had ever faced. Both in its inherent quality and in its demand this sign was climactic.

These seven signs culminating in the resurrection of Jesus, the eighth and greatest of all, carry the theme of the power of Christ as it penetrates and dominates the adverse forces of human existence. They illustrate every aspect of Jesus' sovereignty over the world and the methods by which he exercised that sovereignty to evoke faith, or in response to it.

Two aspects of the life of Jesus are prominent in this Gospel: what Jesus did, and what He was (20:30-31). The first aspect concerns His action; the second, His character. John confines the action largely to the signs, which have already been discussed. In addition, he uses such episodes as the entry into Jerusalem (12:12-19), the washing of the disciples' feet (13:1-15), or His rebuke to Peter at the betrayal (18:1-11) to reveal His nature. These deeds or works, as John calls them, attested His competence as a Savior, and confirmed His claim to deity. His character was summarized in the words, ". . . Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God" (20:31). Both His office and His nature are involved in this statement. The dual theme begins with the prologue, and continues through the entire Gospel. "Messiah" (Gr. *Christ*) is an Old Testament concept, and represents the person who the prophets declared would become the redeemer and the teacher of God's people. "Son of God" emphasizes the new revelation of deity through the Son who bears God's nature in flesh, and who speaks as a man, but with divine authority.

Unlike the Synoptics, which portray the Messiah mainly against the Jewish background of political and social hopes,

John emphasizes the spiritual meaning of the title. He records how John the Baptist refused to be regarded as the Messiah, and focused the attention of his disciples on Jesus. John's intent to present Him as the Messiah is confirmed by the words of Andrew: "We have found the Messiah" (1:41). Andrew was convinced after an interview that Jesus fulfilled the claims of John the Baptist, and so called Him Messiah. Jesus Himself affirmed His Messiahship when He told the Samaritan woman, "I that speak unto thee am he" (4:26). When she announced to the village her tentative belief, they first listened to Him, and then believed, saying, "Now we know . . . that this is indeed the Saviour of the world" (4:42). Their equation of Messiah and Savior indicates that their estimate of Him was theological rather than political.

Contrary to the certainty of the Samaritans is the confusion of the Jewish multitude depicted in chapter 7:35-44. In the last critical months of Jesus' life He appeared in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. Impressed by the depth of His teaching and by the magnitude of His claims, the multitude debated whether He might be the Messiah. They asked three questions: "Can it be that the rulers indeed know that this is the Messiah (Christ)?" (7:26); "When the Messiah (Christ) shall come, will he do more signs than those which this man hath done?" (7:31); "What, doth the Messiah (Christ) come out of Galilee?" (7:41). The first question indicates their dependence on the interpretation of the leaders. If their teachers maintained silence concerning Jesus, did they do so because they knew Him to be the Messiah, but did not want to acknowledge His claims?

The second question expresses popular feeling. Jesus had performed so many wonderful works that the people could scarcely expect the Messiah to be any greater. The third question implies that the popular concept was defined by Scripture, since they would not accept the suggestion that the Messiah could come out of Galilee. He must be a descendant of David and originate from Bethlehem, as the prophet Micah (5:2) had declared. Ironically, the people did not know the truth that He conformed to the prophetic requirements. The uncertainty troubled them, for at a later date they asked Him pointedly whether He were the Messiah or not (10:24). On

the very eve of the cross, the multitude expressed its mis-giving by protesting that the Messiah (Christ) should abide forever (12:34). How, then could He suffer death? Jesus made His final claim in the prayer to the Father, in which He called Himself the Messiah (Christ) (17:3).

The theme of Christ's sonship is a parallel to that of His messiahship. The title, "Son of God," was first applied to Him by John the Baptist (1:34), and was echoed by Nathanael (1:49) in the opening paragraphs of the Gospel. The function of Christ as Son of God is elaborated in the explanation following Jesus' teaching on the new birth (3:16-18). He is the Savior of the world, to whom men must commit themselves in order to receive eternal life. This discourse to Nicodemus parallels the verdict of the Samaritans, who declared after listening to Jesus, "Now we believe . . . for we have heard for ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world" (4:42).

As Jesus' career progressed, a growing complexity of reaction to His claims developed. During the last year of His life He spoke more openly concerning His own person, yet the bewilderment of the crowd increased. When they demanded that He declare whether He were the Messiah or not, He made plain that He had already demonstrated His Messiahship, and He boldly asserted that He was the Son of God (10:36). The two themes converge in the confession of Martha, who answered His challenge to faith, "Yea, Lord: I have believed that thou art the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, even he that cometh into the world" (11:27).

John's doctrine of the Messiah differs in its emphasis from that of Matthew. Matthew connects it more definitely with the fulfillment of the national destiny of Israel. John unites it with Jesus' sonship in the function of saviorhood. The difference is more apparent than real, since the nation of Israel was created to be the vehicle of salvation for the world (Gen. 12:1-3; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8), and since its mission is fulfilled in the person of the Messiah who is the Son of God.

The last great theme in this symphony is life. The Gospel opens with the statement, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4), and closes with the declaration of its main objective, "That believing, ye may have life

through his name" (20:31). The term is defined in Jesus' final prayer: "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ" (17:3). John regards life as both a dynamic and an experience. As a dynamic it renews and refreshes the soul; as an experience it enlarges the scope of understanding and acquaints the believer with God.

This concept permeates the entire book. The life is like a light which shines in darkness, for it manifests the radiance of the divine glory to men (1:14). The two chief characters of the early chapters, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, were both recipients of this revelation. To the cultured and learned rabbi Jesus said that life would be attained by the new birth, which involved repentance and the inner work of the Holy Spirit. For the outcast Samaritan woman He described it as an inward supply of living water, refreshing and always plentiful. In both cases, life was conditioned on faith in Him.

The concept of eternal life is expanded with the development of the Gospel. It involves superiority to physical death, for it is linked with the resurrection of the last day (5:21, 25). Yet this life is not simply an award or condition to be expected in the future; it is a present possession of all who have truly believed (5:24), guaranteeing to its possessor exemption from condemnation, and triumph over death.

In the synagogue at Capernaum Jesus discoursed on the bread of life. He emphasized sustenance rather than destiny, though He asserted that those who believed on Him would have eternal life, and would be raised at the last day (6:40). The crux of His message lay in the declaration that unless His hearers would eat His flesh and drink His blood they would have no life in them (6:53). Contrary to His intention, many took his words literally, and turned away from Him because they did not understand His meaning. His figurative language was an obstacle which they could not surmount. He meant that they must absorb Him into their lives as they assimilated their food, in order that the life in Him might be transmitted to them.

In a later discourse He announced that He had come as the Good Shepherd to bestow life, and to give it abundantly, (10:-

10). The context emphasizes the aspect of safety and protection which the sheep enjoy under the guidance of the shepherd and in the shelter of the fold. "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (10:28).

In His final discourse to the disciples, Jesus reiterated the importance of eternal life. To the incredulous and pessimistic Thomas, who could see only failure and death in Jesus' impending fate, the Lord said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me" (14:6). If life consists in the knowledge of the Father, the introduction to that knowledge comes only through the Son. A similar idea appears in the metaphor of the vine, for fruitfulness, which is a product of vitality, depends upon direct union with Christ, the true Vine (15:1, 4). "Because I live," He said, "ye shall live also" (14:19).

The fulfilment of eternal life is implied in Jesus' prayer. In his petitions for the disciples He spoke of revelation (17:6), preservation (17:11), joy (17:13), sanctification (17:17), unity (17:21), and glory (17:24). In the resurrection of Christ completeness was manifested, and the immediate effects exemplified. Consolation, peace, and certainty were imparted to the desolate disciples as they entered into a new experience with Him.

These themes of the signs, the sonship and messiahship of Christ, and eternal life run concurrently through the Gospel like the melodies of a symphony. They interweave with each other, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly where their connections are openly expressed. They are related to the keynote of belief, for the signs are the basis of belief; the person of Christ is the object of faith, and eternal life is the result of belief. By the interrelation of these topics the Gospel is constituted a coherent whole, conveying the message of God's love and saving power to men.

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