

BIB203 Life of Christ NT1

Unit 2 Reading 4

JFB, “The Gospel According to John”

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The Gospel According to John
Commentary by DAVID BROWN

THE author of the Fourth Gospel was the younger of the two sons of Zebedee, a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, who resided at Bethsaida, where were born Peter and Andrew his brother, and Philip also. His mother's name was Salome, who, though not without her imperfections (Mat 20:20-28), was one of those dear and honored women who accompanied the Lord on one of His preaching circuits through Galilee, ministering to His bodily wants; who followed Him to the cross, and bought sweet spices to anoint Him after His burial, but, on bringing them to the grave, on the morning of the First Day of the week, found their loving services gloriously superseded by His resurrection ere they arrived. His father, Zebedee, appears to have been in good circumstances, owning a vessel of his own and having hired servants (Mar 1:20). Our Evangelist, whose occupation was that of a fisherman with his father, was beyond doubt a disciple of the Baptist, and one of the two who had the first interview with Jesus. He was called while engaged at his secular occupation (Mat 4:21-22), and again on a memorable occasion (Luk 5:1-11), and finally chosen as one of the Twelve Apostles (Mat 10:2). He was the youngest of the Twelve--the "Benjamin," as DA COSTA calls him--and he and James his brother were named in the native tongue by Him who knew the heart, "Boanerges," which the Evangelist Mark (Mar 3:17) explains to mean "Sons of thunder"; no doubt from their natural vehemence of character. They and Peter constituted that select triumvirate of whom see on JF & B for Luk 9:28. But the highest honor bestowed on this disciple was his being admitted to the bosom place with his Lord at the table, as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (Jhn 13:23; 20:2; 21:7, 20, 24), and to have committed to him by the dying Redeemer the care of His mother (Jhn 19:26-27). There can be no reasonable doubt that this distinction was due to a sympathy with His own spirit and mind on the part of John which the all-penetrating Eye of their common Master beheld in none of the rest; and although this was probably never seen either in his life or in his ministry by his fellow apostles, it is brought out wonderfully in his writings, which, in Christ-like spirituality, heavenliness, and love, surpass, we may freely say, all the other inspired writings.

After the effusion of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, we find him in constant but silent company with Peter, the great spokesman and actor in the infant Church until the accession of Paul. While his love to the Lord Jesus drew him spontaneously to the side of His eminent servant, and his chastened vehemence made him ready to stand courageously by him, and suffer with him, in all that his testimony to Jesus might cost him, his modest humility, as the youngest of all the apostles, made him an admiring listener and faithful supporter of his brother apostle rather than a speaker or separate actor. Ecclesiastical history is uniform in testifying that John went to Asia Minor; but it is next to certain that this could not have been till after the death both of Peter and Paul; that he resided at Ephesus, whence, as from a center, he superintended the churches of that region, paying them occasional visits; and that he long survived the other apostles. Whether the mother of Jesus died before this, or went with John to Ephesus, where she died and was buried, is not agreed. One or two anecdotes of his later days have been handed down by tradition, one at least bearing marks of reasonable probability. But it is not necessary to give them here. In the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96) he was banished to "the isle that is called Patmos" (a small rocky and then almost uninhabited island in the AEgean Sea), "for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:9). IRENAEUS and EUSEBIUS say that this took place

about the end of Domitian's reign. That he was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil, and miraculously delivered, is one of those legends which, though reported by TERTULLIAN and JEROME, is entitled to no credit. His return from exile took place during the brief but tolerant reign of Nerva; he died at Ephesus in the reign of Trajan [EUSEBIUS, Ecclesiastical History, 3.23], at an age above ninety, according to some; according to others, one hundred; and even one hundred twenty, according to others still. The intermediate number is generally regarded as probably the nearest to the truth.

As to the date of this Gospel, the arguments for its having been composed before the destruction of Jerusalem (though relied on by some superior critics) are of the slenderest nature; such as the expression in Jhn 5:2, "there is at Jerusalem, by the sheep-gate, a pool," &c.; there being no allusion to Peter's martyrdom as having occurred according to the prediction in Jhn 21:18 --a thing too well known to require mention. That it was composed long after the destruction of Jerusalem, and after the decease of all the other apostles, is next to certain, though the precise time cannot be determined. Probably it was before his banishment, however; and if we date it between the years 90 and 94, we shall probably be close to the truth.

As to the readers for whom it was more immediately designed, that they were Gentiles we might naturally presume from the lateness of the date; but the multitude of explanations of things familiar to every Jew puts this beyond all question.

No doubt was ever thrown upon the genuineness and authenticity of this Gospel till about the close of the eighteenth century; nor were these embodied in any formal attack upon it till BRETSCHNEIDER, in 1820, issued his famous treatise [Probabilia], the conclusions of which he afterwards was candid enough to admit had been satisfactorily disproved. To advert to these would be as painful as unnecessary; consisting as they mostly do of assertions regarding the Discourses of our Lord recorded in this Gospel which are revolting to every spiritual mind. The Tubingen school did their best, on their peculiar mode of reasoning, to galvanize into fresh life this theory of the post-Joannean date of the Fourth Gospel; and some Unitarian critics still cling to it. But to use the striking language of VAN OOSTERZEE regarding similar speculations on the Third Gospel, "Behold, the feet of them that shall carry it out dead are already at the door" (Act 5:9). Is there one mind of the least elevation of spiritual discernment that does not see in this Gospel marks of historical truth and a surpassing glory such as none of the other Gospels possess, brightly as they too attest their own verity; and who will not be ready to say that if not historically true, and true just as it stands, it never could have been by mortal man composed or conceived?

Of the peculiarities of this Gospel, we note here only two. The one is its reflective character. While the others are purely narrative, the Fourth Evangelist, "pauses, as it were, at every turn," as DA COSTA says [Four Witnesses, p. 234], "at one time to give a reason, at another to fix the attention, to deduce consequences, or make applications, or to give utterance to the language of praise." See Jhn 2:20-21, 23-25; 4:1-2; 7:37-39; 11:12-13, 49-52; 21:18-19, 22-23. The other peculiarity of this Gospel is its supplementary character. By this, in the present instance, we mean something more than the studiousness with which he omits many most important particulars in our Lord's history, for no

conceivable reason but that they were already familiar as household words to all his readers, through the three preceding Gospels, and his substituting in place of these an immense quantity of the richest matter not found in the other Gospels. We refer here more particularly to the nature of the additions which distinguish this Gospel; particularly the notices of the different Passovers which occurred during our Lord's public ministry, and the record of His teaching at Jerusalem, without which it is not too much to say that we could have had but a most imperfect conception either of the duration of His ministry or of the plan of it. But another feature of these additions is quite as noticeable and not less important. "We find," to use again the words of DA COSTA [Four Witnesses, pp. 238, 239], slightly abridged, "only six of our Lord's miracles recorded in this Gospel, but these are all of the most remarkable kind, and surpass the rest in depth, speciality of application, and fulness of meaning. Of these six we find only one in the other three Gospels--the multiplication of the loaves. That miracle chiefly, it would seem, on account of the important instructions of which it furnished the occasion (Jhn 6:1-71), is here recorded anew. The five other tokens of divine power are distinguished from among the many recorded in the three other Gospels by their furnishing a still higher display of power and command over the ordinary laws and course of nature. Thus we find recorded here the first of all the miracles that Jesus wrought--the changing of water into wine (Jhn 2:1-11), the cure of the nobleman's son at a distance (Jhn 4:43-54); of the numerous cures of the lame and the paralytic by the word of Jesus, only one--of the man impotent for thirty and eight years (Jhn 5:1-9); of the many cures of the blind, one only--of the man born blind (Jhn 9:1-12); the restoration of Lazarus, not from a deathbed, like Jairus' daughter, nor from a bier, like the widow of Nain's son, but from the grave, and after lying there four days, and there sinking into corruption (Jhn 11:1-44); and lastly, after His resurrection, the miraculous draught of fishes on the Sea of Tiberias (Jhn 21:5-11). But these are all recorded chiefly to give occasion for the record of those astonishing discourses and conversations, alike with friends and with foes, with His disciples and with the multitude which they drew forth."

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