

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: JOHN 5: 1 - 18

There were many events occurring at the time of the writing of John's gospel, none greater than the destruction of the Temple. The Temple was the most sacred part of Judaism, the central place of worship for the Jews. Due to the destruction, the religion underwent great change. Judaism became Pharisaic as the Pharisees became the dominant figures in the upholding of the Jewish law after the Zealots and Saducees had been defeated. The synagogue became the centre of worship, but due to their differing beliefs, the Christian Jews were expelled from the synagogue in 85 A.D. The Christians had become outcasts. This resulted in a great deal of tension being created between the Jews and the Christians.

The gospel was written when the Christians were still coming to terms with their expulsion from their previous religion. By supporting another god they were breaking the law, and as a result they were being persecuted because of their faith in Jesus.

John would have been exposed to Greek philosophy in the community that surrounded him in Ephesus, where he wrote the gospel.<sup>1</sup> John also needed to provide proof that Christ was the saviour to repel the trend of the Greek people moving towards Gnosticism due to the Christology against the Jews and to the Jewish Christians as the Christians began to oppose each other.<sup>2</sup>

John's Gospel is believed to have been written between 80-95 A.D. after these events had occurred, John needed to stabilise the faith at a time when the faith was being questioned.

There are many views voiced over the purpose of John's Gospel. John himself writes in his gospel, in 20:31, when he speaks of the miracles that Jesus

---

<sup>1</sup> Charpentier, E. How to read the New Testament London: SCM Press Ltd, 1993

<sup>2</sup> Brown, R.E. The Community of the Beloved Disciple, pg 166-167

performed, "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." The Jews had been waiting for the Messiah, the Son of God to come, John was trying to prove to the people that in fact , Jesus was this man. As a result of the belief that the Christians now had, they were defying Jewish law. Because of this, the Jewish Christians were experiencing a lot of tension at the time with the Jewish Synagogue, due to the conflict between their Jewish roots and their new faith in Jesus Christ. As a result of their treatment the faith was wavering, John's gospel gave guidance and strength to those Jewish Christians in their times of hardship, so that their faith would be maintained. <sup>3</sup>

Through the translation of the original gospel, another interpretation as to a possible reason for writing the gospel arises, depending on what tense the gospel is translated in. On one hand, John's gospel can be seen as an attempt to convert people to the new faith. But on the other hand, when viewed in the opposing tense, and the more favoured view, it is believed that John wrote the gospel to those already converted, to strengthen and encourage their new tradition, a tradition that Jesus himself had started and which the people were already familiar with. <sup>4</sup>

John 5:1-18 incorporates a miracle narrative that is used as an introduction to a discourse involving Jesus. This passage appears to be the fusion of two distinct stories, (i.e the miracle and the discourse).<sup>5</sup> The passage begins with John detailing the healing of a paralysed man. Following this, John explains how Jesus is challenged by the Jews for working on the Sabbath, and the justification he gives for his actions.

This passage follows on from the theme of Chapter 4, "the importance of love,"<sup>6</sup> which is demonstrated on this occasion by Jesus healing the paralysed man despite the restrictions of the law. Following this passage, the verses 19-24, are the

---

<sup>3</sup> Goosen, G and Tomlinson, M. Studying the Gospels Alexandria: E.J. Dwyer, 1994

<sup>4</sup> Hunter, A.M. The Gospel According to John Cambridge: C. V Press, 1965

<sup>5</sup> Lindars, B The New Century Bible Commentary, London: Marshall Morgan and Scott Publ. Ltd, p 209

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

explanation of what Jesus was implying in his discourse, concerning his equality to the Father. He explains what he inferred, which was that he was equal to the Father not only in actions such as healing powers but in ultimate redemption.<sup>7</sup>

Because it is a miracle, this passage is in the Book of Signs, (Chapters 1-12) which is concerned with the miracles Jesus performed during his ministry. This particular passage occurs in part three of the Book of Signs, a section detailing miracles associated with Jewish feasts.<sup>8</sup>

This passage sets the standard for times in the future when Jesus disobeys the Sabbath laws and the questioning he receives from the Jews. The fact that Jesus had put himself equal to the Father, put him off-side with the Jews, and gave them a case against him for their plot to eventually kill him.

Throughout this passage John refers to the Jews as the group who started to persecute Jesus (verse 16) These "Jews" he refers to are the Jewish leaders: the temple authorities. It was the Jewish leaders who were responsible for expelling the Christians from the synagogue. This passage is an example of the resentment the Johannine community had for the Jews, feelings that are intensified in this particular passage.

The Jews start a verbal attack on Jesus for disobeying the Sabbath laws. As upholders of the law, it was the responsibility of the Jews to question Jesus. The Sabbath was a sacred day for the Jews, a day of rest devoted to God. This Sabbath law came from the Torah, the source of the Jewish law, in Genesis and Exodus. When the Jews ask Jesus to justify his actions, Jesus replies with authority that: My father is still working, and I also am working. (verse. 17). John here gives reference to Jesus' explanation of his identity. By his reference Jesus

---

<sup>7</sup> op cit, Hunter, pg 221

<sup>8</sup> Barrett, C.K The Gospel According to John, William Clowes Ltd. Beccles and Condon, 1978, pg 210

was claiming that he was equal to the Father.<sup>9</sup> This claim was outright blasphemy to the Jews.

The Jews are implying that if he were truly the son of the Father then he would surely maintain the respect for the holy day of the Sabbath. The Jews refused to believe in Jesus' claims. For Jesus is showing the Jews that it was the Father who set the laws and he, as the son of the Father, had the authority to do what was required of him on the Sabbath.

John addresses some of the key issues that faced the Johannine community and the Jews of the time. The Christians were facing many problems that related to their faith in Jesus. Their new faith was being tested by the persecution they were receiving from the authorities. The Johannine community needed reassurance so that their faith could be strengthened. John needed to give them encouragement and inspiration to maintain their faith.

This passage also addresses the new importance of the Sabbath, through the way Jesus approached it. The Jews had rejected the Christians for their new beliefs, the Christians were now faced with the problem of how they now approach the Jewish law, placed on them by the Pharisees that had just expelled them for disobeying other laws of theirs. John needed to set new guidelines for the Christians to follow.

At the same time, John also addresses the confusion held at the time by the Pharisees in establishing the true identity of Jesus. It was a question of belief versus disbelief for the Jews. The Jews refuse to believe that Jesus is from the Father. By proving the real identity of Jesus, John can show to the Christians the importance and opinion Jesus had of the Sabbath.

---

<sup>9</sup>Brown, R.E The Gospel According to John, (I-XII) Doubleday, U.S.A, 1966, pg 249

John's reassurance to the Johannine community comes in the form of a comparison between the situation they found themselves in and the way in which Jesus himself was treated by the Jews. Jesus was persecuted for his claims and beliefs, but in the end he conquered all and conquered death. John tries to demonstrate to the Christians that that their situation was not dissimilar to that of what Jesus faced. John's message and answer to their problem is not to worry about their persecution, because Jesus was persecuted and they will also be persecuted for believing in him, but in the end, they will be rewarded for their faith in Christ.

John points out to the people that Jesus truly is the son of the Father, the chosen one. He is the man capable of curing the ill with his miraculous works. John shows to his community and to the Jews that Jesus is not restricted by the Sabbath law, that he in fact supersedes the law, and that as the son of the Father he has a right to change the common practice.

Through detailing Jesus' actions on the Sabbath day and by showing how Jesus was prepared to exercise his love for the people by his healing actions, John was demonstrating to the people that Jesus was showing them that love was the most important thing, that the law was below love, and that it was love that they must express within their community.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Lindars, B The New Century Bible Commentary, London, Marshall, Morgan and Scott Publ. Ltd, 1995

Coggins, R.J and Houlden J.L (ed.) A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation 3rd ed., London, SCM and Trinity Press International, 1994

Orchard, D.B, Rev. Fuller, R.C et al (ed.) A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd. Edinburgh, England, 1957.

Brown, R.E. The Churches, the Apostles Left Behind. New York: Paulist Press, 1984.

Moloney, F.J The Word Became Flesh, Butler: Clergy Book Service, 1977

Brown, R.E et al The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994

Charpentier, E. How to read the New Testament London: SCM Press Ltd, 1993

Moloney, F.J Reading John, Blackburn, Dove, 1995

Goosen, G and Tomlinson, M Studying the Gospels Alexandria: E.J. Dwyer, 1994

Barrett, C.K, The Gospel According to John William Clowes Ltd, Beccles and Condon, 1978.

Brown, R.E Gospel According to John, (I-XII), Doubleday, U.S.A, 1966.