

The Death of Jesus in John

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The gospel of John does not tell us everything about Jesus. Like the other gospels it concentrates only on the ministry of Jesus after he was baptised by John the Baptist. In John's gospel the ministry lasts about three years. In the other gospels the ministry lasts less than a year. The gospels began to be written about forty years after Jesus' death, Mark in the late 60's or early 70's, Matthew and Luke in the mid 80's and John in the 90's.

Each gospel gathers stories about Jesus which had been circulating and places them in a framework which is fairly loose and which they felt free to rearrange, because no firm record existed of exactly in what order the events occurred. Mark was the first to create an order in which to tell the story and on the whole Matthew and Luke follow Mark's order. John is different, but common to all is the beginning with John the Baptist and the ending with Jesus' death and resurrection.

We can look at Jesus' death at a very human level. Jesus became unpopular with the authorities, so they killed him. That leaves us asking many questions. Why did Jesus become unpopular with the authorities? Why did they kill him by hanging him on a cross? This was a terrible, humiliating death. How can this have happened? Is it not something very shameful?

John's gospel sets the story of Jesus within a wider context. We see this right at the beginning. Instead of simply starting with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, the way Mark does, John's gospel goes right back to the beginning of creation to set the scene. In words which remind us of the opening statement in Genesis John's gospel begins: "In the beginning..." It then speaks of the Word. In Jewish tradition people had begun to speak about God's Wisdom and God's Word as being like a power within God and sometimes almost like a companion of God. They never saw it as another God. God is one. But they often spoke of God's Wisdom or God's Law as something which had its own entity and existence. Those who saw God's Wisdom contained in the Law could say that God had given us his Law, his Word. But often they would speak of God's Word or Wisdom almost as if it were a person, like a very senior angel. Partly this was just a very daring use of imagery.

Some writers spoke of God's Wisdom coming down to earth and looking for a place to live and finding it only in Israel (Sirach 24:7-8). Others were more pessimistic. They spoke of wisdom finding nowhere to dwell, but always finding rejection (1 Enoch 42). The communities where John's gospel was written had begun to use these images to speak of Jesus. They began to see Jesus as the human being in whom God's Word came to dwell. They also repeated the idea that God's Word or Wisdom in Jesus kept being rejected. They saw Jesus and the Word as one. As people rejected God's Wisdom, so they rejected Jesus. In 1:11 we read: "he came to his own people and his own people did not accept him." 1:12 continues: "But to as many as accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God".

This means that right at the beginning of John's gospel we have a hint of Jesus' death. As people reject God and God's word, so they will reject Jesus. This sets the scene for

all that follows. People who understand the beginning of John's gospel know that Jesus is not just a man doing good deeds and giving good teaching. He is the man in whom God's Word has appeared. He remains fully a human being, but he is also at the same time God's Word. There many ways of saying this. Some made it sound like Jesus was claiming to be a second God, but that was certainly not the case.

The most common way in John's gospel was to say that Jesus is God's envoy, the one whom God has sent to represent him. He came to make God known, as 1:18 puts it. He came to do God's will. But because John's gospel has used the image of God's Wisdom and Word to explain what he was saying about Jesus, it conveys an image of Jesus as the Word or Son of God who came from God and was with God from the beginning. This can be confusing. It never meant that God was literally a father and that Jesus was literally God's son or child in the sense that there must also be a mother somewhere. God is one. Jesus remains a human being. But people tried to bring two important things together: in Jesus it wasn't just a good human being whom people met; they were being met by God (through Jesus); and in Jesus we do not see something other than God, as if the Word is a second God, but only the one God in and through Jesus.

I have commented on this also in the chapter on the Miracles as "Signs". There I explain how the things that people said about God they now began to say about Jesus. God is life and light and truth. They began to say that Jesus is life and light and truth. God gives us the deep nourishment, the bread for our souls, the water to quench our inner thirst. So people said: Jesus is the bread of life and gives the water of life. It never meant that Jesus was any of these things independent of God. He was only these things because he obediently and faithfully did God's will and because in his being he was one with God in everything he did.

So already in the beginning of the gospel we read that "in him was life and the life was the light of people" (1:4). "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome or accepted it" (1:5). At the end of the introduction John tells us that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we behold his glory" (1:14). The glory was like God's own light, but it was shining in Jesus. It also sets this glory in contrast to the glory of Moses. Moses received the gift of the Law from God (1:17). Now something greater has come: grace and truth (1:17). No one has ever seen God, but the Word which comes from God is really part of God and so in Jesus can make God known (1:18).

The introduction to the gospel (1:1-18) helps us, therefore, understand what is going in what follows in the rest of the gospel. That includes the story of his death. When we see and hear what the introduction is telling us, we can look at Jesus very differently. Throughout the gospel we find that some people see like this and others cannot see this deeper meaning at all. This is the reason for the conflict. When people hear Jesus speaking about doing God's works it sounds like blasphemy, like Jesus is pretending to be equal to God or even to be a rival to God, but this is all a terrible misunderstanding.

Some of the first hints of conflict after the introduction come already in chapter 1. John the Baptist describes Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). We will come back to that. The other is in the final verse which points

to a future time when Jesus will be surrounded by angels. This is a hint of what will happen after he dies. Jesus is pointing to something greater still to come to which the disciples can look forward.

Another hint comes in the story of Jesus at the wedding feast in Cana (2:1-11). When Jesus' mother points out that the hosts have run short of wine, Jesus' first response is to say that his hour has not yet come (2:4). Jesus will often refer to his "hour" and by it he means his death. It comes here to alert the reader to the deeper meaning of the story. It is not just about Jesus making water into wine. It is also about the new spiritual wine which Jesus will offer after his death. Many of John's original hearers would have been reminded of the meal of bread and wine which had become a central part of their Christian worship. Beside the hint about the new is also a hint about the old: the stone jars with water for purification rites. These are not disparaged, but they will be left behind.

The next episode, where Jesus clears the outer court of the temple (2:13-22), expresses more clearly that the old is to be left behind. The old temple will be left behind. Jesus himself will be like a new temple - after his death and resurrection (2:22). We find the same idea a little later in John 4 where Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that there is to be a new way of worship which will replace the old temples. It is worship in the Spirit and in truth (4:24). To speak of the new replacing the old is to invite conflict especially from those who see the old as permanent. This is one of the roots of the resistance against Jesus among his people.

In the story of the expulsion from the temple Jesus uses a verse from the Psalms to declare that his zeal for God's house will lead to his own destruction: "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:17; Psalm 69:9). While in John's gospel this story comes at the beginning of Jesus' three year ministry, in the other gospels it comes right at the end and appears to be one of the reasons why the authorities decide to put him to death (see Mark 11:15-18; 14:58).

Even among people who apparently support Jesus there can be problems. 2:23-25 tell us that Jesus was not happy with people wanting to follow him just because they were impressed with his miracles. He tells Nicodemus, who is typical of such support, that he needs to develop a completely new way of seeing. He needs to become a new person, to be born again or from above (3:1-5). John's gospel is highlighting a contrast between those who see with the help of the Spirit and those who see only at a human level. Those who see with the help of the Spirit see Jesus in the light of the kinds of things that have been said in the introduction. Those who see only at the human level see only Jesus the man.

The effects of having some people able to see (including the readers of the gospel) and some people not able to see is quite dramatic and makes it possible for statements to carry two opposite meanings. For instance, in the conversation with Nicodemus Jesus again returns to speak about something even greater yet to come (as he had done in 1:50-51). He speaks about his ascent to heaven in 3:13 and in 3:14 speaks about how he will be "lifted up". Those who know the whole story but see it only with human eyes will think about how Jesus was crucified: he was "lifted up" onto a cross. But "lifted up" can also mean "lifted up" or "exalted" to heaven. This is how the eyes

of faith see the event. It is a play on words which occurs a number of times in the gospel (see also 8:28; 12:32,34).

The potential conflict comes more into the open in John 5 where Jesus heals a lame man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The problem is not the healing, but that Jesus did it on the sabbath and told the man to pick up his mat and carry it home on the sabbath. "The Jews" - which really means some other Jews, because Jesus and his disciples were also Jews - saw this as blatant disregard of the commandment not to work on the Sabbath (5:16). It became even worse when Jesus justified his action by saying that he was doing his Father's work (5:17). They thought he was claiming to be equal to God (5:18). Jesus meant no such thing, as his explanation shows (5:19-21). On the contrary, he was being obedient, doing what his Father had taught him, like a son who learns a trade from his father. But Jesus makes very big claims. He claims that he not only acts for God now in doing his will, but that he will also act for God in judgement in the future (5:22-29). He will be God's Word then as he is now.

Such conflicts over Jesus' claims continue in the following chapters. Jesus' opponents either misunderstand what Jesus is saying or they understand and reject his claims. They do not understand his claim to come from the Father and to be returning to the Father. Through chapters 6-10 Jesus uses images which reflect major Jewish feasts. In each case he is portrayed as making the claim that he has come to replace the old. In John 6 the image of the Passover lies in the background as Jesus declares himself the true bread (6:4,26-50) and describes his flesh and blood as the true meal which brings salvation (6:51-58). In John 7-8 he picks up the rituals associated with the Feast of the Tabernacles (Sukkoth), the lighting of the torches and the pouring of water. Now he is the light of the world (8:12); now he gives the water of life (7:37-39).

John 6 also reports that even some of his followers turn their backs on him because of these claims (6:60-71). The same happens again in John 8. In John 6 Jesus' Jewish opponents are pictured as grumbling, just as Israel had grumbled against Moses and against God in the wilderness (4:41). In John 8 the conflict reaches a new climax, where the Jews accuse Jesus of being possessed by demons (8:48, 52) and Jesus accuses them of being children of the devil (8:37-47). These scenes probably have more to do with the bitter conflicts which had developed between Christian Jews and other Jews in the community where John's gospel was written than anything that happened during the ministry of Jesus. When people forget they are inner Jewish disputes, they can misuse the statements in ways that are anti-semitic and anti-Jewish. In history this led to hatred and persecution of the Jews. John's gospel was not wanting to be anti-Jewish.

We find a similar reflection of such conflicts in John 9 where the Pharisees are angry that Jesus heals a blind man on the sabbath (9:14) and the man's family fear they will be expelled from the synagogue because they believe in Jesus (9:22). The gospel cleverly turns this around against the Pharisees and shows them as blind (9:39-41). Probably members of John's community had experienced being expelled from the synagogues (see also 16:2).

The conflict rolls on through John 10 where Jesus attacks false shepherds (leaders; 10:1-10). His own claim to care about his sheep the way God cares for his own (10:11-16; and especially 10:28-29) provokes another bitter exchange based on

misunderstanding. Jesus claims to be one with God (10:29), which his opponents take as a claim to make himself God (10:30). This is not what Jesus meant, as he goes on to explain (10:32-39). He is one with God in doing God's will and in being the one whom God sent. The conflict worsens. John 11 and 12 shows Jesus' opponents objecting to Jesus even when he does good things like raising Lazarus from the dead (11:47).

At a human level another consideration comes into play when the Jewish leaders gather to discuss about what to do with Jesus (11:47-53). The Jewish authorities objected to Jesus' claims and were worried about the support he was getting from the crowds (11:48). In John 11 we hear for the first time that they were also worried about the Romans (11:48). Their fear was that if the Romans noticed that Jesus had a great following they might see this a Jewish revolt and decide to suppress Jewish worship. They reasoned that it would be better on those grounds to have Jesus killed and save the rest of the people than to let him continue and endanger everyone. Jesus' death was politically expedient. It is an example of justifying abuse of human rights.

This may well have played a role in the actual historical reasons for Jesus' execution. In John, however, it is full of dramatic irony, because John's readers will have known that just forty years later the Romans did precisely what they feared and destroyed the temple and ransacked their city after there was, in fact, a real revolt. The authorities wanted Jesus to die for the sake of the people. To the eyes of faith Jesus did, indeed, die for the sake of the people, but in a completely different sense.

At the human level of seeing, the authorities plotted to have Jesus killed. They arrested Jesus, conferred among themselves (18:12-28) - but (in John) without a trial - and handed Jesus over to Pilate. The trial before Pilate (18:28 - 19:16) shows the Jewish leaders conspiring against Jesus and betraying their own faith. They even declare that they have no king but the emperor (19:15)!

Jesus' trial and execution by a Roman crucifixion was a cruel and callous act. The eyes of faith also see it as cruel suffering. John's gospel portrays Jesus as distressed (12:27), but it also shows him as willing to go through the suffering because he was determined to obey God's will right to the very end (12:27-30). When Christians would face suffering, they knew Jesus had suffered before them (12:26).

Some people appear to have been uncomfortable with the thought that Jesus really was human and really did suffer. John makes a special effort to leave us in no doubt. He reports that when the soldier stuck a spear into Jesus body, blood and water came out (19:34). He then adds: "The one who saw it has testified and his testimony is true and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe" (19:35). It needed to be emphasised that Jesus died a natural human death and had a real human body.

The eyes of faith, however, see much more than just a human death. John's gospel reports that on the cross, just before dying, Jesus declared: "It is finished" (19:30). Earlier in his final prayer to God, Jesus had declared: "I have finished the you task you gave me to do" (17:4, 6-8)). Jesus' task was to God known. He kept faithful to that task to the end. God loved the world of people so much that he sent his Son (3:16-17). Jesus expressed this act of love right to the end (13:1-3). The cross was the

climax of this revelation: love that was willing to go the whole way, even to death. Jesus said: “None has greater love than this: to give his life for his friends” (15:13).

Elsewhere he said he was like a shepherd giving his life for the sheep (10:11, 15). So the cross is a revelation of love. It shows how far love will go. It is also a revelation of sin and evil: how far evil will go. For John’s gospel the cross exposes evil: the hating of love and of God. It marks the climax. It is an act of judgement: people pass judgement on Jesus according to the human way of seeing; but to the eyes of faith God passes judgement on the world by showing its wickedness. John can even say it is therefore a place of victory of evil and the evil one (12:31; 16:8-11).

John the Baptist called Jesus the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). This could mean that he was the Messiah who had come to take wickedness away from the world, especially because sometimes a lamb is used as a symbol for the Messiah and the context in John is about Jesus as Messiah. It might also remind some people of sacrifices. Many Christians saw Jesus’ death as being like a sacrifice which helped remove sin and guilt. There are echoes of this also in John’s gospel. Some thought of Jesus as being like the Passover lamb, slain and then eaten in a feast to remind Israel of the night they were delivered from slavery in Egypt. According to John’s gospel Jesus died on a Passover weekend at precisely the time when the lambs were being killed for the Passover meal, which was celebrated the following evening (18:28). It was common to use a range of images to describe Jesus’ death, because it made such an impact on people.

Jesus’ death is important in John for another reason. It starts something new, which Jesus has explained as something even greater than what he was doing on earth, as we saw already in 1:50-51 and 3:12-15). It was the point where he would return back to God, exalted, glorified, ascended. He was returning to the glory of his home with God (13:31; 17:1-5). In John he promises to his disciples, that when he returns he will send the Spirit or ask God to send the Spirit (14:16-17). The Spirit would help the disciples to understand more fully who Jesus was and tell his story more effectively (14:26; 15:26; 16:8-15). The Spirit would also help them in their mission to the world (12:32). The result would have an even greater outreach than Jesus’ ministry. That is what Jesus means when he says: “The works I do you will do and greater works than these because I go to the Father” (14:12).

So Jesus’ greater moment to which he pointed forward during his ministry was the “hour” of his death, resurrection and return to the Father (2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1). It would mark the turning point. From then on the disciples would have to carry on Jesus’ mission and go out into all the world. In a way that reminds of the first creation of human beings, Jesus breathed on the disciples and they received the Holy Spirit. He instructed them: “As my Father has sent me, so I send you” (20:22). Earlier Jesus had said: “And I, if I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself” (12:33). He was describing his death, when he was lifted up on the cross, but also his return, lifted up to God, which would start the mission which would bring so many to become his followers (see also 12:24, the seed which must die to bear fruit).

The death of Jesus in John is not a tragedy. It is cruel. It is real. It results from conflict with his fellow Jews and their fear of the crowds and of the Romans. God’s prophets have always faced rejection. Jesus did not run away, even though his disciples did,

when they faced the pressure of the last days. Jesus remained on course. He finished his work. He gave his life to make known God's life and light and truth and love. He exposed evil and its hatred of the light and of love. This was also his path through suffering death that would bring him back home to God. Only the eyes of faith could see this. His return was the great turning point which set off something new: the community of faith equipped with the spirit for deeper understanding and for spreading the good news about Jesus in the world. All who honour and celebrate this love and walk in this light walk also in the way of Jesus, because they walk in the way of God, the compassionate one.