

INTRODUCTION

THE TRUE STORY

"Help me believe in anything. 'Cause I wanna be someone who believes."

-Counting Crows



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "Christ Carrying His Cross," (detail), oil on oak wood, 1564

Take a good look at the painting above. Go ahead; we'll wait. Notice anything? At first glance, you might mistake Bruegel's work for a sixteenth-century version of *Where's Waldo*. Look harder. Look deeper. Do you see him? It's Jesus — barely noticeable at the painting's center. He moves in obscurity, carrying his cross through a sea of faces seemingly unmoved by the ragged stranger in their midst. With the exception of Jesus, the figures all wear contemporary dress, as if Jesus had stepped from Jordan's stormy banks into renaissance Europe. It raises a fascinating question: If Jesus were to step into our neighborhood, how would we recognize him? Would he be surrounded by an entourage? Paparazzi? Would he be driving a Range Rover or a Prius? Or would we even notice him at all, too

absorbed in our day-to-day to notice the Savior walking among us. As I consider these questions for myself, I find that it's my own paint that flakes away, revealing the raw bones of faith that lie beneath.

YOUR OWN PERSONAL JESUS

Jesus has come a long way since the renaissance. From the “Jesus fish” on the back of your minivan to the “Jesus is my homeboy” t-shirts, Jesus lies somewhere between religious figure and pop culture icon. His name is invoked at both drag balls and political rallies on both sides of the aisle. And though no city would dare place so much as a manger scene on public property, Jesus’ cross adorns our bodies in the form of jewelry or tattoos. “Jesus remains cool,” writes Barry Taylor, artist and professor at Fuller Seminary. “It’s just that his earthly representation — the church — remains uncool.” For a culture of postmodern pilgrims, the quest is to “save” Jesus from the “smothering confines of the church, and particularly the fundamentalists and conservatives who...have done Jesus a great injustice by making him out to be just like them — uptight, overly religious...lacking a sense of humor, and disconnected from the way things are.”¹

Indeed, many long for a vision of Jesus free from the perceived corruption of “organized religion” — a Jesus that’s more than just a distant shadow cast by centuries of tradition, but a Savior of flesh and blood that can empathize with our experience. Music fans may remember the old song by Depeche Mode (later covered by Johnny Cash). What we want, they sang, is “your own personal Jesus...someone who hears your prayers; someone who’s there.”

We’ll find this Jesus in Sussex, England. There, above the door of a church hangs a panel of stained glass but a seven-foot-tall statue of Jesus sporting a pair of blue jeans. Journalist Steve Case find this vision of Jesus far more relatable:

“I’d like to have a cup of coffee with Jesus someday. Not the guy in the clean white robe who speaks in King James English...just a ‘guy.’ A son of God who laughs, hangs out with the outcasts, breaks the rules that need breaking, and calls the finger-pointers on the carpet.”²

This isn’t just a matter of personal taste. According to Case, it’s essential for the church’s survival:

“If we can find a way for people to see and touch and smell Jesus, it might make it a little easier when we ask them to have faith in a Jesus that is beyond our senses. Yes, what Jesus did...was an act of immeasurable compassion and love. But isn’t it easier to hug someone whose arms aren’t nailed down?”³

Roughly a century ago, modern scholars drew a sharp division between the “Christ of faith” and the “Christ of history.” Gotthold Lessing famously said that the Bible’s readers find themselves on the edge of an “ugly broad ditch,” unable to make a “leap” of faith.⁴ But our postmodern world is vastly different. We’ve crossed Lessing’s ditch to find ourselves standing in a hall of mirrors. The question

¹ Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 153.

² Steve Case, “Jesus in Jeans,” *Seminole Chronicle*, August 6, 2009.
<http://www.seminolechronicle.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2009/08/06/4a79f21072ee3>

³ Ibid.

⁴ G. E. Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed. and trans., Henry Chadwick (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1956), 55.

is no longer “Should I believe in Jesus or not?” but “What *kind* of Jesus should I believe in?” For some, Jesus is a political mascot or a social revolutionary. For others, he’s a symbol of acceptance and love. Which one is the “real” Jesus?

To answer this question, we need only examine the testimony of those who knew him best — like John. John’s biography of Jesus tells us of the time that God came down to earth, walking among us with the same vivid clarity as Bruegel’s painting. And if we pay close enough attention, we’ll discover a true and better vision of Jesus, one that invites us to exchange this “Jesus in jeans” for what Calvin called a “Christ who is clothed in his gospel.”⁵

JOHN’S “SPIRITUAL GOSPEL”

In many ways, John’s culture mirrored our own. There are hints that in John’s own city of Ephesus, early Christians had only a limited knowledge of who Jesus truly was (Acts 18:24-25). Stories of Jesus had circulated widely, to be sure, but their meaning had yet to catch up. And if we assume that John wrote later in the first century, he wanted to leave behind a spiritual legacy that would unite the fledgling Church around a shared understanding of Jesus’ true, exalted position — namely, that Jesus was God in the flesh.

He makes this intention plain near the conclusion of his biography of Jesus:

“Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples... But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31)

Scholars have labored over the exact meaning of the word “believe.” Is John writing to convince skeptics to *start* believing? Or is he writing to help Jesus’ followers *continue* believing? Given John’s love of double meanings, he almost certainly means *both*. John wanted to ensure that there could be no misunderstanding regarding the divine nature of Jesus Christ. He wanted believers to understand Jesus’ elevated nature as God’s Son, as well as introduce non-believers to the Savior’s life and mission. That’s what makes John a wonderful book for mature Christians as well as spiritual seekers. Leon Morris famously compared John’s gospel to a pool that’s shallow enough that a child can wade in, yet so deep that an elephant can swim.⁶

The early church recognized this as well, calling John’s biography of Jesus a “spiritual gospel.”⁷ In a way, it’s the perfect gospel for today’s spiritual climate. Some have called our world “post-secular.” Even though we’ve lost interest in traditional religion, our spiritual reflexes are still intact. John tells that in Jesus, heaven and earth are open to each other. “There’s no line on the horizon,” to quote a popular song.⁸

“Believing” becomes the central theme of John’s gospel. Though the word “faith” is absent, the verb “believe” is used nearly 100 times. But for Jesus’ earliest followers, belief isn’t something that

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Faith*, III.ii.6.

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. New International Commentary on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 3.

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, as cited by Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 6.14.7

⁸ U2, “No Line on the Horizon,” from their 2009 album of the same name.

they have all at once. Instead, their belief is something that grows over time, reaching its fullest crescendo after the resurrection when “doubting” Thomas proclaims: “My Lord and my God!” John invites us on a similar journey, a journey to believe more deeply in the person of Christ, and to understand the life that such belief would bring.

THE UNIQUENESS OF JOHN

Even a casual reading of John will reveal that it’s remarkably different from the “synoptics” — Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It differs from these other writings in both content and style. If we compare John to a movie, would it be a “director’s cut,” containing the stories that other writers left out? Or would it be more like a “theatrical reboot,” re-telling the story for a new (mostly Greek) audience? Over the years, scholars have adopted both approaches to one degree or another. But more recently, some have championed a “new look” at John that shrugs off such comparisons to let John speak for himself.⁹ If we adopt the same approach, we find that John’s uniqueness owes to his central mission: he’s arranging his material to stir curiosity and answer questions about the person of Jesus.

According to an ancient writer, Jesus’ divinity “cannot be expressed in words,” so “we sketch it by its attributes.” John’s truest artistry is his ability to weave together the attributes of Jesus to form a composite portrait of the Son of God. As we explore his biography of Jesus, we’ll discover several features that make his writing dazzlingly brilliant and utterly unique:

- **Seven Signs:** While every gospel describes Jesus’ miracles, John specifically names them as *semeia*, or “signs.” For John, Jesus’ works serve as almost a kind of supernatural performance art, all of which emphasize Jesus as the unique Son of God.
- **Seven Discourses:** Many of Jesus’ signs are accompanied by lengthy discourses — conversations and speeches that explain Jesus’ identity and work. Not that these discourses always bring clarity; John is a master of the “misunderstood statement,” where Jesus’ words are not fully understood until after his resurrection.
- **Seven “I AM” Statements:** On seven occasions Jesus makes declarative statements about himself: “I AM the bread of life,” “I AM the light of the world,” etc. The use of “I AM” echoes the name of God himself in the Old Testament, which makes each of these statements a unique claim to Jesus’ divinity.
- **“Eternal Life:”** While the other gospels contain Jesus’ teaching on “the kingdom of God,” John uniquely focuses on “eternal life” for all who believe.

None of these features can be precisely mapped onto each other, nor should they be. Our present study simply seeks to bring John’s meaning to the surface, understanding how Jesus is the true Voice of God, the true Light, and the true Lamb.

These qualities make John the most “lyrical” of the gospels. Indeed, if Luke was Dan Rather, John was Bob Dylan. He’s writing true history, to be sure, but his style and form artistically weave the content of belief into the rough fabric of human experience. John peels back the edge of the merely ordinary to get at the really *real*. And during an era when Christians were increasingly alienated from traditional places of worship, John delivers an anthem of protest against a stale religious establishment.

⁹ Gary M. Burge summarizes the various ways that gospel of John has been conceived of development. See his work, *Interpreting the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 23-29.

No other writer satisfies the soul-level cravings of a world that hungers for image and thirsts for meaning.

CAN WE TRUST JOHN?

Some years ago, author James Frey garnered national attention for his memoir: *A Million Little Pieces*. Oprah's seal of approval vaulted him onto the bestseller rack and into the media spotlight. There was just one problem: he made the whole thing up. His memoir wasn't a complete fabrication; but he'd twisted events for his own literary glory. "I figured he was taking license," said a real-life witness to one of Frey's stories. "He's a writer, you know, they don't always tell everything that's factual and true."¹⁰

Sound a little jaundiced? Maybe. But this is essentially the position taken by many critical scholars of John. For centuries, John was revered for giving us the most information about the life and ministry of Jesus. After all, only John helps us see Jesus as having a three-year ministry. Today, skeptics scoff at the idea that John offers anything meaningful at all, just another writer "taking license" with the facts.

It's only been recently that such doubt has been cast on writers like John. Prior to the modern period, John's gospel was universally understood as eyewitness testimony. At the conclusion of John, we read: "This is the disciple who testifies about these things and has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true." (21:24) He stops short of mentioning himself by name, but the evidence points to this being the "beloved disciple" (21:7), John. John had gone on to mentor a man named Polycarp, who taught a man named Irenaeus. During his time as Bishop of Lyon, Irenaeus confirmed that John was written by John, "the beloved disciple," who "published a gospel during his residence in Ephesus in Asia." By the close of the second century, this conclusion was shared throughout the Church.

The same church traditions likewise state that John was the last gospel written, composed late in the disciple's lifetime. This would date the gospel of John to around 95 AD. But more than a few scholars note that John speaks of major landmarks as if they were still standing, which suggests a date prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.¹¹ So, John could have been written at any time between 65 and 95 AD. The point is that the gospel was composed during John's lifespan, and during a time when other witnesses could either corroborate or challenge his account of Jesus' life.

Hold on, I hear you object. That still doesn't mean that what John wrote was necessarily true. Isn't there still a possibility that John composed a work of utter fiction?

Prior to writing his beloved *Narnia* series, C.S. Lewis was a literary scholar and professor at Oxford. Lewis wholeheartedly rejected the suggestion that John's gospel could be dismissed as mere legend:

"I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two

¹⁰ Laura Vanderkam, "When Fiction Masquerades as Truth," *USA Today*, January 17, 2006. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2006-01-16-masquerade_x.htm

¹¹ See Hall Harris, "Background to the Study of John," <https://bible.org/seriespage/background-study-john>

possible views. Either this is reportage...Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative.”¹²

Granted, ancient biographies weren’t immune to embellishment. But Lewis’ point is that first-century authors had no category for “fiction” of this caliber. The more reasonable conclusion, says this esteemed literary professor, is to accept John as historical fact.

Writing in *The New York Times*, Ross Douthat notes that “there’s so *little* theological smoothing out within the Gospels, so few signs that the writers carefully imposed an ideologically driven clarity on the experiences they set out to relate.” Douthat endorses a “naive reading” of the gospel narratives. By that he means that we set aside our critical assumptions and see the gospels as “having this imperfect, memoirist quality,” writings in which “the memory [is] more potent than any theological program.”¹³ The trustworthiness of John can’t be reduced to a matter of scholarly opinion. It’s a matter of historical fact.

JOHN’S STORY, MY STORY

For me, John has always occupied a treasured place in my spiritual life. I grew up in church, so Jesus was sort of always just “there” — a faithful, though silent member of the extended family whose lacquered image hung unobtrusively on my grandmother’s wall, and who bore a suspicious resemblance to the Brawny towel man.

Like many of my generation, I’d become somewhat disconnected from church during my college years. The roar of youth group had faded, and I was left with challenging questions as I pursued a career in science. I soon discovered that many young adults felt the same; possessing what one of my professors would later call a kind of “brittle fundamentalism,” one that shattered against life’s innate complexities.

After earning a degree in biochemistry, my first career was in a government lab. Though I was familiar with the Bible, it was a lyric from a rock song that had colonized my imagination: “I was just guessing, with numbers and figures, pulling your puzzles apart. Questions of science, science and progress, do not speak as loud as my heart.” For all my education and early success, something still burned within me like a low-grade fever.

Meanwhile, I’d become reconnected to a church community that refused to shy away from tough, even academic questions. They asked me to lead a Bible study for a group of young adults. The book they handed me? The gospel of John. To memory, it was the first time in my adult life that I’d read a book of the Bible from beginning to end. But as I read and studied, Jesus became more vividly real to me than ever before — as if the lines on his face were as clear as the lines on each page. As if

¹² C.S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism” (an essay Lewis read at Westcott House, Cambridge, on May 11, 1959). First published in *Christian Reflections* (1981), later published as *Fern-seed and Elephants* (1998). This text is taken from *The Essential C.S. Lewis* (Touchstone, 1996), 351.

¹³ Ross Douthat, “A Naïve Reading of the Gospels May Be Just What Christianity Needs,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/06/opinion/easter-christian-tradition.html>

for the first time, I saw Jesus through my own eyes, and it was only then that I realized that he saw me through his.

I offer this study in the hopes that you, too, might experience this kind of faith — that you, too, might see Jesus with freshly-opened eyes. After all, in a world of despair and scandal, our greatest heroes are either failures, fiction, or ghosts. John offers a better story. A deeper story. A true story. A story that sets us free from caricatures of Jesus sketched by political movements or religious traditions. A story of how Jesus came down to earth to offer life — and to sacrifice his own.