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God is Love:

The Life and Rhetorical Writings of St. John the Apostle

In academic study, the quest for a universal definition of *rhetoric* is an elusive one.

Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg offer the following:

Rhetoric has a number of overlapping meanings: the practice of oratory; the studies of the strategies of effective oratory; the use of language, written or spoken, to inform or persuade; the study of the persuasive effects of language; the study of the relation between language and knowledge; the classification and use of tropes and figures; and of course the use of empty promises and half-truths as a form of propaganda. (1)

Francis Bacon states that “[t]he duty and office of Rhetoric is *to apply Reason to Imagination* for the better moving of the will” (743). This is possible only when the author and the audience understand the same meaning of the words used. John Locke states that “[t]he chief end of language in communication being to be understood, words serve not well for that end, neither in civil nor philosophical discourse, when any word does not excite in the hearer the same idea which it stands for in the mind of the speaker” (817). My definition, which I intend to apply to this paper, is that rhetoric is the use of language, whether written or spoken, to state clearly, what the author believes to be true and to attempt to convince the audience, through reason, the truthfulness of that belief.

The Christian religion receives its sense of truth in different ways. The primary source of information regarding the truthfulness of Christianity is the canon of accepted scripture known as *The Holy Bible*.<sup>1</sup> Another source of information, which is extant in Christianity, is oral and written *tradition*<sup>2</sup>—stories that have been repeated so many times in the past 2000 years, without actually knowing their source, that they are considered to be true. Scripture and tradition, combined with other factors such as secular history and archaeology, form the basis of theological scholarship.

Many of the writers of The Holy Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, effectively used rhetoric to communicate their message. Even Jesus himself used rhetoric in his teaching. One of the most skilled rhetoricians of the New Testament writers was St. John the Apostle.

Also known as St. John the Evangelist, St. John the Devine, John the Revelator, and in his later years, simply the Elder, John was the son of Zebedee and the brother of James. Both John and his brother were numbered among the original twelve apostles who knew Jesus personally and were taught by him. Jesus affectionately referred to the brothers as “the sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). John and James’ mother was named *Salome*, as was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus; if this were the same person, as many scholars believe, that would make John and James first cousins of Jesus, which would also make them cousins of John the Baptist (Culpepper 8-9). Like another set of brothers who became

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I am making the assumption that The Holy Bible is inspired scripture, that the writers and characters described in The Holy Bible actually lived, and that the events described actually happened.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I am making the assumption that characters and events, which are not found in The Holy Bible, but are Christian traditions, may or may not be true, or have actually happened.

Jesus' apostles, Peter and Andrew—John and James were fishermen. Jesus first encountered Peter and Andrew, and called them to his ministry (Mark 1:17-18), then:

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. (Mark 1:19-20, NIV)

John wrote five books of the New Testament: The Gospel of John, the three Epistles of John, and Revelation, which is sometimes called the Apocalypse. The order of the books of the New Testament, while generally in chronological order, is also presented in thematic order. The four Gospels are first, followed by the book of Acts, the Pauline epistles, the other epistles, and finally the book of Revelation. Most scholars believe that The Gospel of John was written first, but a case can be made that the three epistles were written first (Johnson 522)—either way, both are thought to have been written between AD 85 and 90 (Scofield 1114, 1321, 1326, 1327). The book of Revelation is thought to have been written last—around the year 96 (Scofield 1330).

### The Gospel According to St. John

One of the most intensely debated subjects of Christian theology, known as the *synoptic problem*, involves the order in which the Gospels were written. The primary disagreement is whether *Matthew* or *Mark* was written first. However, it is generally agreed that *Luke* was written third and that John's Gospel was written last (Johnson 526). The other three Gospels are called the synoptic Gospels. For the most part, all three follow the life of Jesus in chronological order, and describe events in Jesus' life—things that he said, and things that he did—and do so with little, or no commentary. John's Gospel is

significantly different; although John does tell us about events in Jesus' life, there are also considerable expository writings in which John expounds upon his personal thoughts and feelings about Jesus. John often speaks about the character and personality of Jesus from a holistic viewpoint, rather than specific events of his life (Johnson 528-31).

Consider the following from Chapter 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. [. . .] The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1: 1-5, 14, NIV)

A professional theologian could very easily devote his or her life's work to the analysis of this excerpt of John's *prologue*. John's intricate use of language communicates much solid theological thought in just a few words. In the original Greek, the first five verses are presented as a series of rhyming strophes, some of which are chiasmic in form (Johnson 534).

Upon reading this, the most obvious rhetorical technique that John uses to communicate his thesis is the parallel that he draws to Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. [. . .] And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1: 1, 3, 4, NIV)

The parallel between the two is so striking that it removes any doubt that John had access to, and had read, the writings of Moses that today we call the book of Genesis. The first three words, “In the beginning,” are identical. Genesis continues with “God created the heavens and the earth,” then verse 3 explains that God made things happen by speaking. In John's version, “In the beginning” is followed by “the Word.” The Greek word λόγος (logos) is translated into English as *word*. Scofield states that:

The Greek term means a thought or concept [or] the expression or utterance of that thought. As a designation of Christ, therefore, *Logos* is particularly felicitous because in Him are embodied all the treasures of the divine wisdom, the collective “thought” of God; and, He is, from eternity, but especially in His incarnation, the utterance or expression of the Person, and “thought” of Deity. (1114)

It is important to note that John makes it clear that Jesus was not “just another man.” By stating “the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God,” and that “He was with God in the beginning,” John proclaims the divinity and Godhood of Jesus. John continues, by stating that it was actually Jesus who created the world and everything in it.

Key concepts that appear both in Genesis and in John's prologue include *beginning, God, speak/word, made/created, life, light, and darkness*. Johnson states the following:

We find that the Word bears both light and life. Light and life are primal metaphors for the very essence of God. We see as well that the light is locked in conflict with a darkness that can neither “accept” nor “overcome” the light. [. . .] Jesus' testimony [. . .] is that of a light “coming into the world,” and he thus personifies the truth. (534-35)

In his first epistle, John continues this thread:

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1: 5-7, NIV)

In John 1:14, by stating that “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” John proclaims the truthfulness of the *incarnation*—that Jesus, who is God, came to Earth in human form. By stating “We have seen his glory,” John gives his testimony that he, and others, were contemporaries of Jesus, while he was on the earth, and knew from first-hand experience—that Jesus is what he claimed to be.

One of the most well-known passages from John's Gospel is John 3: 16, 17. I once heard a preacher, on the radio, make the statement that the entire message of the Bible is summarized in these two verses. Although I usually prefer the *New International Version* (NIV), in this case, I find the *King James Version* to be more expressive:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3: 16, 17, KJV)

John opens this passage with a proclamation of God's love for mankind, a subject that he would revisit in his epistles. He then states that God gave his *only* son. The Greek word μονογενής (monogenēs) means *only born* (Strong G-3439). The King James Version renders this as *only begotten* denoting that Jesus is the only physical, biological offspring of

God the Father. John's next statement, that anyone who believes in Jesus would have everlasting life is of crucial theological importance. One of the false doctrines that has crept into Christian ideology is that a person can be “saved” by being a good person and by doing good things—salvation by works. There are many statements throughout the Bible make it clear that none of us is good enough, on our own merits, to go to Heaven, and that salvation is by grace, not works, and that is a gift from God that we do not deserve. Isaiah states that “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isaiah 64: 6, NIV). In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul makes the following statement: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2: 8-9, NIV). John states that God the Father sent his son into the world so that mankind could be saved.

### The Johannine Epistles

The epistles that are found in the New Testament are letters written by church leaders to congregations that were too far away for them to communicate with in person. Thirteen of these were written by Paul, two were written by Peter, James and Jude wrote one each, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews is unknown, and John wrote three epistles. John served as pastor of the church in Ephesus, which was founded by Paul. A significant difference between Paul’s epistles and John’s is that the Christians in Ephesus in John’s day were second and third generation Christians who were already believers, and were familiar with the basic tenets of Christianity. Unlike his writings in his gospel, where his primary purpose was to convince his audience that Jesus was the son of God who was the only way to salvation, John’s epistles were intended to strengthen the knowledge and

faith of his followers at Ephesus. John's first epistle was probably not an epistle at all but a sermon that was preached orally to a live audience. It has the characteristics of a message from a devoted pastor who had a love and concern for a definite group of believers (McGee, ix-x).

John opens his first epistle with these words:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3, NIV)

This passage serves as a connection to the *prologue* of John's Gospel. It uses the same symbols for *beginning*, *Word*, and *life*, and includes John's testimony that he, and others, had personally witnessed the deity of Jesus Christ and were now proclaiming it to the world. Although this proclamation was originally directed toward the church of Ephesus, since it has been written down, it is now a witness to all who may read it—including you and me.

In chapters 2 and 4 of the first epistle, John takes the concept of the love of God to the next level, by extending the process to mankind's love for one another:

Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and

walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him. [. . .] If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. (1 John 2:10-11, 4:20, NIV)

John's rhetoric in this passage, and throughout his epistles, is powerful and profound; yet, it is remarkably simple, and easy to understand. Almost all textbooks designed for first-year New Testament Greek courses in seminaries start with John's epistles, because the Greek is the simplest in the entire Bible—both in vocabulary and in grammatical structure.

Another thing that I want to make clear at this point, is that whenever John, or any other biblical writer for that matter, uses *male* terminology and pronouns, is not with the intention of excluding females. In New Testament Greek, male pronouns were used unless it was specifically known that they referred only to females. Most modern English translations strive to render the original language as accurately as possible; however, some translations such as the *New Language Translation* are presented with more gender-neutral language. For example, whereas the NIV says "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar," the NLV says "If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar."

John's second and third epistles, both of which are only one chapter each, are personal letters. The second epistle is addressed to an unknown woman—"the chosen lady." John offers her counsel, which is consistent with his earlier writings, regarding the need to "love one another" (2 John 5), followed by a warning to be aware of pagans and their false teachings (2 John 7-11). John's third epistle is addressed to a man named Gaius, to whom John offers praise for his good work, and a warning to beware of a man named

Diotrephes, who had been “gossiping maliciously about [them]” (3 John 9-10). Although the second and third epistles are short and are addressed to individuals, they reveal much about the first century Church—that they struggled with the same problems that Christian churches face today.

### The Revelation

The book of Revelation is perhaps the most famous book in the Bible—and the most misunderstood. Johnson states the following:

Few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as the Book of Revelation. Its history of interpretation is largely a story of tragic misinterpretation, resulting from a fundamental misapprehension of the work’s literary form and purpose.

(573)

Unlike his Gospel and his epistles, the book of Revelation is not characterized by John’s rhetorical arguments. John was on the island of Patmos, and had a series of visions, which he recorded. For the most part, John simply wrote down what he saw and heard. Most of the narrative text in the book is the voice of Jesus Christ and a succession of Angels who speaks to John, who records what he hears. In that sense, the rhetoric in the Revelation is not actually John's rhetoric. However, John does contribute to the presentation of the text through the descriptive language he uses. When Jesus Christ appeared to John, he made the following description:

His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. (Revelation 1:14-15, NIV)

Everyone who reads Revelation has a different interpretation of it. My personal opinion is that John saw and heard many astounding things that he described according to his first century perspective. Consider the following:

And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. (Revelation 9:3, 7-9, NIV)

I have heard the interpretation that John looked into the future and saw a group of men riding motorcycles on the open road. I was first introduced to this idea by reading it on the back of a biker's leather jacket.

Although John is not presenting his own rhetorical arguments in the book of Revelation, rhetoric is still extant in the book. In this case, John was the receiver of the rhetoric, and because of him, so are we. All of the great minds who have examined the book of Revelation in the past 2000 years, and have written about it, have contributed an endless supply of rhetoric on the subject.

### John's Legacy

There is an established connection between John and the early church fathers. Polycarp (69-155), who eventually became the Bishop of Smyrna, was a disciple of John and was taught by him (Cairns 76-77). Ignatius of Antioch (35-107) was also a contemporary of John, and studied under him (Grant 421). Irenaeus (115-202) was born in

Smyrna, studied under Polycarp, and eventually became the Bishop of Lyons (Cairns 107). A “genealogy of discipleship” could be designed that shows how John’s students had students of their own who, in turn, had students, and so forth, to create an unbroken chain to the modern age.

Of course, the early church fathers also had access to John’s writings. In the fourth century, a crisis arose regarding Christian doctrine. A man named Arius was promoting the idea that God the Father alone was eternal, without beginning, and that Jesus Christ the Son did not exist before his earthly birth—and that although Jesus was the offspring of God, he himself was not God. The net result of this teaching was to reduce the Son to a demigod. Even if he infinitely transcended all of the creatures, he himself was no more than a creature in relation to the Father (Kelly 223-230). Arius soon had followers who promoted this doctrine, which caused a schism that threatened to divide the church on the issue of the very nature of God. In 325, an ecumenical council met at Nicaea, which officially condemned this doctrine—and declared it to be heresy (Kelly 231-232). The council issued a statement, which came to be known as the *Nicene Creed*. The following is an excerpt:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

The Nicene council resolved this doctrinal crisis by making an appeal to the scriptures, including the writings of John. The Nicene Creed directly reflects the prologue to John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the *Word*, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the *beginning*. *Through him all things were made* [. . .]. In him was life, and that life was the *light* of men. [. . .] The Word *became flesh* and made his dwelling among us. [. . .] (John 1: 1-4, 14, NIV, italics added)

John's writings have inspired his readers for the past 2000 years. The prevailing theme of John's message is that God loves us, and there we should love one another—which is the central thesis of Christian ideology. John has the distinction of writing both the simplest and the most complicated books of the Bible. John's Gospel and his epistles use simple but powerful rhetoric to declare the majesty and Godhood of Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation is far more complex, but still declares the majesty and Godhood of Jesus Christ. John has always been one of my favorite biblical writers and has been a source of personal inspiration for me. I will close this paper with John's final words in his Gospel:

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:24-25, NIV)

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