The Gospel According to John

Counting words can be instructive in highlighting some of the emphases of John’s Gospel. In Matthew’s Gospel, the word “kingdom” occurs 47 times; in Mark’s Gospel it occurs 18 times; in Luke, 37 times, whereas in John only five times. If the kingdom is not central to John’s Gospel, what is? In Mark, Jesus utters the word “I” nine times, whereas in John the word “I” occurs 118 times. In Mark the word “Father” is mentioned only three times, but in John 100 times. Clearly the focus of John is on Jesus and the Father.

Since John’s Gospel involves some tensions with some Jews, it would be worthwhile to examine the meaning of the Jews in his Gospel. John contains a theme of replacement (replacement of something old with something new, or replacement of something inferior with something superior). This replacement theme, for example, comes through in Chapter 4 when Jesus is talking to the Samaritan woman. As a Samaritan she participates in a sacrificial system in central Israel apart from the sacrificial system in Jerusalem. The Samaritans offered animal sacrifices on Mt. Gerezim in the time of Jesus and continue this practice to the present time. The Jews, on the other hand, offered sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem on Mount Zion. In Chapter 4 of John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:21-23). Here the theme of replacement focuses on replacing mountain worship both by Jews and by Samaritans. Worship in spirit and truth is put forward as superior to mountain-focused worship. This is a criticism of both Samaritan and Jewish practice in Jesus’ time, not a criticism of later Jewish practice.

Jesus was a religious critic in the sense that he wanted to purify religion and to clarify the understanding of God and human response to God. As Jesus and his early followers within Judaism experienced tensions with Jewish thought and practice, mutual criticisms contributed to Christianity becoming separate from Judaism. In John’s Gospel, the identity of Jesus is a focus of tension that generated such language as “His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue” (9:22). This unqualified use of the words “the Jews” gives the impression that all Jews have this attitude. John’s Gospel counters this thought by acknowledging in Chapter 12, “Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him.” The danger with the unqualified use of the term “the Jews” is it can and has become a foundation of Christian anti-Semitism. When John’s Gospel refers to “the Jews” the meaning is those Jews at the time of the writing who did not agree with the understanding of Jesus found in John’s Gospel. This Gospel is not identifying all Jews nor Jews of any other time in history as Jesus’ opponents. It is expressing the differences between these two religious understandings. The Jews in John’s Gospel are often those who did not accept Jesus as Messiah or Jesus as manifesting God.

The elevation of Jesus in John begins with the prolog, which identifies Jesus as the pre-existent word of God through whom everything came to be. The Greek word for “word” is logos, and logos theology was circulating in Greek and Hebrew circles before Jesus. In the Hebrew Bible, the wisdom of God is personified in Proverbs Ch. 8, where we read that wisdom is God’s master craftsman, meaning all that God made came through wisdom. It was not chaotic. In the creation story in Genesis Chapter 1, God creates by speaking. John takes this divine wisdom which utters words of guidance and the notion that God creates by speaking. John’s Gospel identifies God’s word with Jesus as the embodiment, the embodiment of God’s wisdom. Jesus is the word made flesh.

Jesus as the logos pulls together Jewish speculation about wisdom and creation in a way that would be appealing to the Hellenistic world which had its own speculation about logos and the world. Wisdom in the Old Testament seeks a resting place. John’s Gospel adds to Jewish logos speculation that the resting place for Divine Wisdom is Jesus. This origin above the world for Jesus colors many parts of the Gospel which you can discover as you read it. Here are a few examples.
In John’s Gospel, Jesus is not baptized but instead supervises the baptism of others. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, he is not tempted in the desert. He uses the Divine name “I Am” of himself several times (Ch. 8, 18). He declares himself “from above” over against his opponents in Ch.8. Instead of the great interior struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane between his will and the Father’s will, one reads simply “there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it” (18:1). Jesus at the arrest “knows all that was to happen” (18:4). At the crucifixion Jesus declares “It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (19:30) instead of crying out “why have you forsaken me” as he does in Matthew and Mark. Jesus is more powerful in John’s Gospel and enjoys a status that helped to sever Christianity from Judaism.