

Episode 5: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Stan:

You are listening to conversations in the Gospel of John episode 5. this episode was recorded in the spring of 2023 at Friends University in Wichita Kansas welcome to conversations in the Gospel of John where we want to bridge the gap between current academic research and contemporary proclamation of this wonderful text my name is Stan Harstine and my co-host is Douglas Estes

Douglas:

I'm Douglas and I have a PhD from the University of Nottingham in biblical studies I currently teach at Friends University and I was a pastor for 16 years

Stan:

I've also been involved with teaching and preaching in Baptist congregations for the past 30 years I currently teach at Friends University in Wichita Kansas and my PhD in biblical studies is from Baylor University we're so thankful that you're choosing to listen to our conversation today

Douglas:

today we're excited to have Chris Skinner with us who teaches at Loyola University Chicago Chris would you like to introduce yourself to our audience

Chris:

yeah absolutely guy thanks for having me guys I'm glad to be with you uh and you're talking about something I care about which is bridging these two worlds um I am professor of New Testament and early Christianity at Loyola University Chicago I also serve as the graduate program director of that department I've been there for seven years before that I was in a small Baptist College in North Carolina my PhD is in biblical studies with an emphasis on new testament from the Catholic University of America and um I teach classes here on New Testament for undergrad New Testament uh historical Jesus and at The Graduate level I teach uh graduate seminars on the gospel John one of which I just finished up last night uh gospel Mark gospel Thomas and the historical

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Jesus and I was a pastor of a Baptist Church in Baltimore for roughly a decade and uh have lots of experience um even um not as a full-time vocational Minister doing work in the church so happy to be with you

Stan:

well we're glad to have you today Chris and one of the questions we always like to start out with is what actually caused you to be interested in the Gospel of John for some of us that's recent memory and for others it's hidden in the past archives of our brain so tell us about your own interests and story in the Gospel of John

Chris:

yeah great um you know and sort of a long trajectory uh in terms of getting me involved and keeping me in the field I started seminary in the fall of 1997 and I was at a seminary that had a very rigorous concentration on the biblical languages my very first Greek class the first election we read was from the Gospel of John and I just remember being it's really captivated by the dynamic language being captivated by the imagery light and dark Truth Versus lie all of these dualisms I just remember just being kind of swept away with that um two years later I took a an exegetical course on the Gospel of John with a scholar named Paul Harris and that class we not only had a sort of a very rigorous treatment of of John in the Greek you know exegetically from start to finish but also a very robust introduction to um so much of the great secondary literature of the 20 20 really the 20th century which is at the very beginning of the 21st The Works of Ray Brown The Works of CH Dodd The Works of um Alan Culpepper uh CK Barrett the list goes on and on basically when I when I finish Seminary and applied to do doctor studies I was shed that I was going to go and work on the gospel John I studied with a uh one of the preeminent Johannine scholars in the English-speaking World Frank Moloney and uh spending more and more time with him uh in the context of the class but also in the context of his office hours just sort of sensed it for me that I was going to spend my life studying the Gospel of John

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Stan:

that's great we'd like to have those family story some of it's it's an accidental fall in and sometimes it's that Professor who guides us into that path so the second thing that we'd like to talk about um and you get to expound a little bit is just what lens do you use when you're studying the gospel when you start reading John and I know you have the classes you teach and sometimes you may use a different lens but for you personally when you're looking at the Gospel of John what lens do you like to use as you're looking through that and beginning to do some writing on that

Chris:

yeah this is such a great question and I have to go back into this this brief story about when I was in seminary um and how uh we sort of looked at everything through a historical lens um and there's such a value to looking at things historically uh but during my third year in seminary I stumbled upon the work of Alan Culpepper who was one of the progenitors of introducing A Narrative Approach into our study of the text and I was I was just immediately awakened from my dogmatic Slumber if you will and uh I uh I started really moving into the world of literary narrative and literary hermeneutics and looking at the biblical narratives from the perspective of how we might look at a great work of literature we look at it as a as a complete utterance as an autonomous story that we read from beginning to end with primary emphasis on the world of the story but also with a fully informed understanding of the World Behind the text so we do understand how for instance the Gospel of John functions from start to finish and tells me hearing a different story about Jesus than what we might get in the gospel of Mark but also we we have to understand uh if we're going rather to understand the imagery of the Gospel if we're going to understand the events of the Gospel we have to understand it in the context of of first century Palestinian Judaism within uh the Roman world so I guess you would say I have what I call a historically informed Narrative Approach

Douglas:

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that's great let's uh break this down let's uh let's talk a little bit about uh folks that may be leading a Bible study maybe they're familiar with the historical approach you know they're reading the gospels and they they know what history is um why should they pay attention in your opinion to the literary part I mean is this how do they pay attention to this what do you think

Chris:

yeah so in terms of the question how they pay attention this is a much more difficult question and I think it's incumbent upon those of us who have the training that we have to actually help them develop eyes to see how to develop this type of approach so what's the benefit of it well I think most of the time and this was my experience growing up in church and even my experience as someone who had formal training if you're in a church that has someone preaching from a lectionary uh or you know reading short passages of scripture each week you only get a snapshot right and most of the time you're getting a snapshot of a piece from Mark and a piece from Matthew and a piece from John and um and what you're getting is these um snapshots that you put together into what I call a mosaic Jesus right and so we never read these individual narratives Who start to finish in a way that shows how Mark might have intended his story to develop from beginning to end or how John might have intended his story to go from beginning to end and once we once we do that and we compare them we realize they're telling a story about the same Jesus but they're telling it in very different ways they're highlighting very different things and so I think the real benefit to this is especially what you're dealing with somebody in terms of in the context of the church or in the context of a Bible study uh is that you are helping them to learn how to read how to read well how to read for when I used to teach seminarians how to read for at least recall for information and for transformation when you only get Snippets you rarely get the the broader the bird's eye view of what the Evangelist is trying to communicate with his story as a vehicle for a type of narrative christology

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Stan:

those are some really good images

Douglas:

yeah that's right I mean I couldn't sit it better myself the Mosaic uh challenge of learning and what ends up happening is I think uh on the level of the Bible study is that people create an amalgamation from all these different little Mosaic tiles that they hear Snippets from sermons and bible studies and that sort of thing and they may not put it together well they may uh they may struggle with that whereas as you were saying that the literary approach teaches us to read I mean it teaches us to engage the text from that that bigger level so let's ask this question then what is a passage in John that you're looking at right now what is uh what is the passage that's intriguing you

Chris:

yeah um so I actually just last night uh finished the last lecture of the semester with a graduate seminar that I'm doing on the Gospel of John but just only just recently um and because of some of the ideas that came up in this class I've been looking at um that first parikathy the first passage in John chapter 20 right um and uh if it's okay with you guys I just want to just read from it very quickly is that okay go for it yeah and I'm reading from the uh I guess this is the NIV I'm reading uh here online um early on the first day of the week while it was still dark Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance so she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple the one Jesus loved she said they've taken him out of the Tomb we don't know where they put him so Peter and the other disciples started for the tomb both were running but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first he bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but he did not go in then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tune we saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus head the cloth was still lying in its place separate from the linen finally the other disciple who had

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reached the tomb first also went inside he saw and believed and then we have this uh what is in English rather a parenthetical comment they still did not understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead then the disciples went back to where they would stay and a couple of things really stood out to me as I was covering this with class and I think these are things that especially in the context of this podcast are things that can preach really well um you have these two figures of major importance to the gospel John there's there's this question about this sort of intramural rivalry between Peter and the Beloved disciple is it really a rivalry gether and they're they're always in contrast with one another but in this scene uh the Beloved disciple stands out to me and um the disciple whom Jesus loved to be called an academic shorthand the Beloved disciple um he's become uh this sort of figure that is to be imitated like everywhere you see him he's saying or doing the right thing um when he is in Chapter 13 when he is um uh at the Last Supper and he's leaning back on the bosom of Jesus so he's reclining on the chest of Jesus this is the almost identical term in Greek that gets used for the relationship between the father and son in the Johanna prologue in chapter one uh when we see him uh in this situation where Jesus has been arrested he is inside with Jesus while Peter is outside sort of warming himself by the fire and denying that he knows Jesus he alone is the disciple who is at the foot of the cross while all others have abandoned him so up to this point everything we have seen from him has been either saying or doing the right thing and then here in this one moment we see that both he and Peter see the exact same thing and neither of them see Jesus and neither of them understand the scripture and yet we read that the Beloved disciple believed and it doesn't say anything about Peter necessary but it does say something important about the Beloved disciple and I feel like for for me this is a paradigmatic of what of what faith can often be like in the world we look around and we see remnants that Jesus is here but we no longer see him and we often don't understand the scriptures that attest to what he did and we don't understand what's going in the world but we choose to believe

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and for me that has incredible theological uh homiletical pastoral personal uh insights and so that's really been resonating with me

Douglas:

well I think um that it would be great if you can help our audience understand how does the literary method really bring this passage alive

Stan:

because we have the three characters we can't forget Mary Did You Have Peter yeah and it's contrasting those two

Douglas:

and it's difficult to teach on because when we think about it we can just explain what happened but there's more to the story here can you elaborate Chris

Chris:

also a fair amount of the work that I've done uh in my career has also been on narrative characterization looking at how characters are presented how they unfold what they do what Their significance is so if we're looking at this narrative from start to finish we meet Peter very early on in the narrative what we meet him uh in contrasting to the other gospels where he becomes you are Peter uh and purchase and uh and Matthew you are Peter and Upon This Rock I will build my church that's just a great confession of Caesarea Philippi right but when we meet him and John the very first thing Jesus does is change his name right so that's an important moment from in chapter one and we meet this character called the other disciple in chapter one isn't the Beloved disciple some of you that it is some argue that it's not uh but we meet these characters pretty early on we meet them both in Earnest together in Chapter 13 uh during the supper scene and there is a back and forth between Peter and the Beloved disciple of Jesus is predicting that he is going to be betrayed and actually Peter looks over to the Beloved disciple and asks Jesus hey ask him what he's talking about so we see there that even though Peter and the other gospels has a tremendous amount of uh of Primacy which I

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think we think reflects his privacy in the early church he still needs to go through the Beloved disciples as intermediate it distill this closeness at the Beloved cycle has with Jesus and then again I've kind of walked you through you know uh when they are uh experiencing the arrest of Jesus they have these contrasting roles again the Beloved cycle was inside with Jesus inside because he's known to the high priest and he's there and Peter is on the outside not with Jesus one himself by the fire along with those people who have arrested Jesus and the mind that he knows him and then they're back again in this one scene and I still think Peter plays an incredibly prominent artifact 21 uh whether we think it's added later or an original part of the Gospel uh Jesus uh kind of reinstates Peter and gives him a threefold opportunity to reverse his previous denial do you love me yes do you love me yes do you love me yes feed my sheep but what's important is that the Beloved disciple is still this one figure who gets Jesus right at every moment now here's where the narrative payoff comes this is an anonymous character he has no name now church history early on said well the Beloved disciple is the son of Zebedee is the author of The Gospel and there's still a lot of debate about that but from a narrative perspective we don't know this person's name right um and often in the Gospel of John characters with no names have tremendous we never meet Mary but in chapter two we meet the mother of Jesus correct chapter four we meet this incredible character called a woman of Samaria she goes on to be the first evangelist in the narrative she evangelizes her whole Samaritan hills in Chapter 20 The Beloved disciple believes and again we're not saying that Peter doesn't but we're shining a light on him so he's always in the right space he's always saying and doing the right things and then here he believes even though he doesn't see so he the Beloved disciple as I've said elsewhere beckons to all of us readers who follow Christ from the pages of the narrative and he says to us if you follow Jesus as I have followed him you too can become a disciple whom Jesus loves and to me that's been there to pay off uh looking at this passage from a narrative perspective

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Douglas:

yeah that's right so let me ask a follow-up question let's assume for a second scenario here that you have a student who comes to you and says hey professor Skinner uh my church has asked me to to speak this Sunday or you know this Wednesday or whatever and I'm gonna cover John 20. I I don't want to miss I don't I'm worried I'm going to miss something what is often missed In this passage when it's taught do you think

Chris:

yeah uh well Stan pointed out to point you just a moment ago which often is I think what was missed by the early church is the role of Mary right we have these very two prominent people Peter and the Beloved disciple who've been through prominent throughout the narrative and we have this this Mary Magdalene but we really only just met at the very end of the Gospel but she is the one thing that we can't miss right she's the one who notices that the Risen Lord is gone she is the one who is privileged to receive that first post-resurrection appearance she's the first one to not only express grief that he is gone but also the first one uh to see him and the first one to um exclaim that he is the Lord so uh to me uh even even despite what I just you know traced us through in terms of the standard approach though Mary Magdalene does appear at the very end and is not promised throughout I think we cannot miss her because she's the setup for all of the other Resurrection announcements and appearances

Stan:

and she's only really referred to as Mary at this point um which is interesting giving the mother of Jesus that and she was there at the the cross and then she is here and that's the first introduction and then she is the first Visionary to follow this when when there's no body she then you know you have those three who don't see and yet she's the one who sees Jesus and and believes and calls him the rabboni that is very intimate teaching term so what else do you think uh this passage might have with uh Peter and

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John issues because the other place that you did not mention is John 6. where if the Beloved disciple has been with Jesus this whole time he's just he's not mentioned but John 6 is where everybody leaves all the other disciples leave Jesus but the twelve stay Peter has that confession at that point and the Beloved disciple is silent

Chris:

there are all these moments where there are kind of these narrative gaps and this is another part of reading there there's these gaps that we have to we have to question first of all there's this other disciple and John uses this language um as we move closer to the end um he is the disciple whom Jesus loved and then at one point he's the other disciple and then by the time we get to 21 he is referred to as the other disciple the one whom Jesus loves so we possibly meet the Beloved disciple in chapter one but there are these places where presumably the Beloved disciple is present uh and we never hear his voice so um I I think that you know there there are these interesting places where we have to assume um and that's kind of what what gapping does with the narrative right it it helps us to think about and maybe try to creatively fill in with those games I

Stan:

I like the narrative Gap part because um at least on the day after the time has all collapsed but even though there are three passovers celebrated there are a lot of months of the year where we have nothing about what Jesus is doing and when we read through synoptics and we read through everything the person who just takes that at face value may think well this is all that Jesus did and yet John makes certain to tell us at the end that there's a whole lot of stuff I didn't tell you you know yeah all these other things that I'm not talking about which are part of the narrative gaps

Chris:

I've been very selective I've only showed you these things so that you might believe and I talk to my students about this a lot so you know because because some of these

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things circulated orally and because they were passed along and because the church really only kept units of material the early church that were that were expedient for preaching teaching um exhortation uh you know liturgical stuff within their churches we you know I often tell my students you know we never have story of Jesus losing his first baby tooth or Jesus breaking his first bone or you know the things that Jesus what I call that the mundane humdrum everyday moments right so sometimes it can be difficult for us to conceive offenders well did you ask did he ever laugh because he always seems so serious right what kind of like what was Jesus favorite meal I mean like the things that you know never come into our mind when we're reading these texts because like you say they're mainly focused around especially in John either Passover or festival Foods right or you know dedication these Jewish speech and we never see him doing things better we're like what you and I are doing right now just talking and you know

Stan:

and they they walk someplace and it took them a while to get there so they were having those conversations

Chris:

yeah if I can't just jump back in and say that another one of the benefits of The Narrative Approach is since we're only getting Snippets in sermons and only getting Snippets and liturgy and only getting significance in the lectionary readings once you have done a Narrative Approach and you've looked at this from beginning to end then when you encounter the snippet the next time you have a much broader context into which to fit that snippet and so what it does is it gives you a framework for understanding each of these units in a much better way prior to A Narrative Approach which you get are only the units in isolation from one another but what the narrative reading can do is it can give you the entire scope of the narrative and then you have these sort of narrow swathes that you're that you're plowing as you go through brick of the ethics could be in sermons or in readings right

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Douglas:

and each of us have as an occupation teaching to some degree and the result of knowing the story allows us to be able to communicate that story better and so whether you're simply leading a Bible study or doing a sermon or even what we do the the power of that story to communicate and connect people to it is really important

Stan:

as we look towards wrapping up I think I just it's an interesting because we're doing with a post-resurrection and we're recording this Easter was a few weeks away and or a few weeks before that but um I didn't hear in My Worship on Easter John's gospel being proclaimed

Douglas:

I have a good story so let's lay aside Protestant Roman Catholic Easter I was in Greece for orthodox Easter last week and I went to the four hour Easter Resurrection service and the Greek Orthodox Church from 11 P.M to 3 A.M on Easter Saturday Sunday and it was all in Greek but the fascinating part was is that I was sitting there and enjoy you know trying to enjoy and worship even though it wasn't the language and then suddenly at one point the service the pastor gets up or the Metropolitan I'm not sure and the hiring gets up and he starts reading and it was John 1:1 forward right the prologue and I immediately recognized it of course and I I elbow my wife I go oh that's John one and so they preach from John 1 uh for Easter that was the Easter text

Stan:

that's pretty amazing it is pretty amazing so we're telling stories since you uh were introduced to our own Culpepper I did my Seminary work and then went to interview at Baylor University and I was a mathematical uh student as an undergraduate and my seminary in the 80s had been very historical and he was talking a little bit about this Narrative Approach and I just kind of went I don't think that's really worthwhile studying after spending time with him and it's like yeah it really is far more important it answers

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questions because the historical approach doesn't always answer questions that people ask but the narrative begins to actually answer questions the people never ask

Chris:

we don't want to minimize the importance of the historical I mean this is a question that came up uh last night in my class because we also all semester it's a two and a half hour class so we do an hour 15 on uh something exegetical and then we do something thematic and last night was methodology and uh my doctor father Frank Moloney always says that it is intellectually dishonest and that is disingenuous to ask the historical questions without asking the literary questions and vice versa we're going to look at the World Behind the text and the world of the text all the people that I have learned the most from since leaving Seminary and even in my own academic career people like Alan Culpepper people like Adele Reinhardt people like Andrew Lincoln people like you guys right I love you like the stuff that you guys have published have all used what I would consider what I've discovered my own work as a historically informed narrative pharmaceutic and to me those two things go hand in hand in a way that really benefits the academy and benefits the church

Stan:

and I think the challenge is as I explained to even my introductory students historical approaches require specific set of questions and literary approaches require a specific set of questions and if they haven't heard the questions that go with A Narrative Approach or a character approach or the literary approach they don't know to ask those questions and I think part of what we get to do is to talk about that and in John 20 we could talk for a long time because after Mary then you have the appearance to the disciples then you have the appearance to Thomas then you have the statement blessed are those who believe without seeing and yet Peter didn't believe when he's without seeing Mary didn't believe when she didn't see the disciples didn't believe without seeing but somehow Thomas gets thrown under the bus for not believing

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Chris:

well let me jump in there real quick because I have this uh I have this whole um a limit against the Thomas politic right and part of this is you know connected to what my own doctor research was but yeah Thomas has the most exalted confession in the whole narrative I mean he he used to the Greek equivalent of Adonai Elohim when he says my Lord and my god um and by the way I didn't I I used Adonai places to buy a name there because I have changed so if anybody's listening like he said Adam I know it's the Divine name there but I use Adonai Elohim because uh out of respect to my uh to my Jewish codes he he says the most highly exalted thing in the narrative about Jesus and other people like you said didn't see and didn't initially believe so I don't think that Thomas is the ultimate dupe or the doubting Thomas I think he's the one who gets it right at the end you know and then that springboard is you've seen you've said the right thing how about all those and who is that that's coterminous with Christianity for the last 2000 years

Stan:

that's right we have to believe without seeing but we don't have to believe without asking questions and we don't have to believe without having conversations well we thank you for taking the time to have a conversation with us about the Gospel of John and we thank those who are listening to us that you will take the time to do that and ask those questions about what is important and how can I Engage The Gospel in ways that bridge the gap between just studying it and actually living it well we certainly enjoyed that conversation with our good friend Christopher Skinner our next episode is the final episode of this series we'll be talking with Tom Thatcher Tom spent nearly three decades at Cincinnati Christian University our conversation will focus on John chapter 21. we hope you'll join us to listen bye now