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## READING THE FOURTH GOSPEL IN THE SOUTH ASIAN CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

This article introduces some of the themes and structural dynamics of the Fourth Gospel in closer integration with the religio-cultural aspects of the South Asian context. As John's Gospel has the potential to appeal to and accommodate the spirituality of South Asia, a re-reading of the Gospel is possible through the means of a cross-pollination of ideas. The four major parts of the Gospel, i.e., the Prologue, the Book of Signs, the Book of Glory, and the Epilogue, demonstrate several cultural and ideological parallels with that of the South Asian realities. A reading that encourages religio-cultural sensitivity can be a required formative factor in the process of interpreting the Fourth Gospel. Some of the key aspects of the Gospel such as the theme of discipleship, the sign language, the "I AM" Sayings, the characters and the characterization, mystical expressions, and dualistic tendencies can be dynamically interlocked within the South Asian ideological and cultural aspects. The universalistic language of the Gospel can have a special appeal to the common realities of the South Asian people.



## **Introduction**

The Gospel of John is considered one of the significant writings of the NT that appeals to South Asian spirituality and ideals in multifarious ways. The Gospel has unique features as a literary masterpiece that encompasses the feelings and aspirations of the Asian communities. The Gospel's genre dynamism (Hellholm 1986:13),<sup>1</sup> features of setting (Resseguie 2005:87), ideological constructs,<sup>2</sup> character traits (Bennema 2009:1-21),<sup>3</sup> plot structure, and point of view reflect and reveal its assimilative power to reverberate the situational aspects of the South Asian communities in particular. In the current essay, first of all, an attempt is made to place the Gospel in the South Asian context in order to derive an interpretative dynamism<sup>4</sup> that takes into account the diverse religious and cultural aspects. The Gospel is better understood in the religious and contextual realities of the South Asians rhetorically. Alongside that, the Gospel also reflects some of the Chinese aspects dynamically and persuasively.

## **The Gospel of John in the South Asian Context**

The Gospel of John through its four significant parts (i.e., The Prologue [1:1-18]; The Book of Signs [1:19-12:50]; The Book of Glory [13:1-20:31]; and Epilogue [21:1-25]) provide a persuasive theological framework for the South Asian communities (Brown 1966/1970). A reader who drowns deep into the Gospel can derive contextually oriented and universally applicable messages. When a South Asian reader approaches the Gospel, the possibility of proximity and the availability of contextual applications are convincing.

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<sup>1</sup> Hellholm notes that, "genres participate in three separate, though related, aspects: form, content, and function."

<sup>2</sup> It deals with the overall development of the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic integration of the text.

<sup>3</sup> It deals with the development of the characters and characterization in the Gospel of John.

<sup>4</sup> Here the expression is used to make the readers aware of the dynamic relationship between John's Gospel and the Asian realities.



### The Prologue (1:1-18)

We can re-read the Prologue of John (1:1-18) as a rhythmical responsive rhetoric (Thomaskutty 2020:41-42).<sup>5</sup> It sustains all the features of a *quasi-poem* (a conglomeration of prose and poem) throughout. One of the South Indian literary forms *Kathāprasangam*<sup>6</sup> has a combination of both prose and poem in a persuasive way. The orator maintains a rhythmical responsive style in the process of its presentation to the audience.<sup>7</sup> Some of the twentieth-century dramatic arts performed on stages sustain the dialogic and musical compositions. The Johannine narrator introduces the first major part of his book through the means of a *tri-level* (i.e., interactive, intratextual, and intertextual) dialogical masterpiece (Stibbe 1993:22).<sup>8</sup> At the *interaction level* of the text, the narrator dialogues with the reader from an eternal point of view. As with the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and other religious writings, the narrator of the prologue presents the events from an omniscient point of view.

At the *intra-textual level*, the prologue is considered as a wisdom hymn stitched together at the forefront of the Gospel to make the overall message comprehensible to the reader. Some of the thematic words of the Gospel are first introduced in these verses: life, light (1:4), witness (1:7), true (in the sense of 'genuine' or 'ultimate,' 1:9), world (1:10), glory and truth (1:14; Thomaskutty 2020:45-46). Throughout the Gospel, the *Logos* is narrated as a divine emissary in conflict with the world (1:9-10; 3:16-17, 19; 6:14; 10:36; 11:27; 12:46; 16:28; 17:18, 21, 23, 37). The narrator also sets an *inter-textual* relationship between the story of Jesus and the story of Moses. Opening with an echo of Gen 1:1, the prologue goes on to identify its protagonist as the *Logos*, the Word of God, and thus places the drama in a cosmic setting and against the backdrop of the OT (Thomaskutty 2020:46). Comparison between Jesus and Moses, and between Jesus' death and the Exodus, recur throughout John (Stibbe 1993:23). The Prologue of John is a unique masterpiece that reverberates in several ways with the South Asian realities. The literary and philosophical framework of the pericope

<sup>5</sup> If we consider the prologue as a responsive reading between A and B, the following format shall explain the structure of the pericope: A: "In the beginning was the Word" and B: "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." This format can be delved out throughout the pericope.

<sup>6</sup> "Kathaprasangam or the art of storytelling performance is popular art form which blends the tradition of music and speech together." <http://www.keralaculture.org/kathaprasangam-folkart/591>, accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

<sup>7</sup> The South Indian literary form called *Kathāprasangam* was/is used to entertain audience of all levels. The presenters usually take the burning social issues and present to the intended audience through rhythm, persuasion, sarcasm, and individual and social critic.

<sup>8</sup> Also see <https://credomag.com/2013/02/intertextuality-and-intratextuality/>, accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021.



resonates through the conceptual aspects like ‘life’ (*jīva*), ‘light’ (*jyoti*), ‘truth’ (*satya*), witness (*sākshi*), world (*lōkam*), and logos (*vachan*) in an interlocking way.<sup>9</sup>

The Fourth Gospel begins with a well-known rhythm as follows: “In the beginning was the *Word*, and the *Word* was with God, and the *Word* was God” (1:1). There are parallels between the Fourth Gospel and the *Chandogya Upanishad* of Hinduism.<sup>10</sup> In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, the sage begins his teaching with the words, “In the beginning, Being (*sat*) alone existed, one without a second” (6.2.1; see Kanagaraj 2005:35). In that sense, Jesus as the *Word* was fully God. The *Word becoming flesh and dwelling among humanity* is one of the incarnational aspects of the Fourth Gospel (1:14). While Jesus is portrayed as the incarnation of God in the Gospel, a similar concept like *Avatāra* is used in Hinduism. The word *avatāra* comes from the root meaning ‘to descend,’ and Rama and Krishna are considered as *avatārs* of Vishnu (see *Gita* 4.7.8; see Boyd 1969/2000:81).<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, there are some similarities between the Johannine *Logos* and the Hindu concept of *Om/Aum*. The divine sound *Om* is derived out of three sounds A, U, M, that represent three Vedas and the *trimurti* of Brahman (‘a’), Vishnu (‘u’), and Shiva (‘m’). In the Upanishads, *Om* is considered as the primordial sound or *Adisabda* and a symbol of true existence (Kanagaraj 2005:39-41). It is considered as the totality of the manifested world, *ekaksara* (‘the one syllable’ or ‘the imperishable one’), *praṇava* (signifying a droning utterance), the symbolism of a sacred syllable, and a prayer or mantra of all other mantras (Owens 2008:573). This understanding of Hinduism goes well with the pre-incarnate (1:1-5) and incarnate (1:14) forms of Jesus in John’s Gospel. These similarities between the Johannine and the Indian traditions foreground the spiritual and religious resonances undercurrent in the textual horizon.

Keshub Chandra Sen considered *Brahman* as *Sat*, *Cit*, *Ananda* (means ‘being,’ ‘intelligence,’ and ‘bliss’). For Sen, in the words of Boyd: “The *Logos*, then, who in eternity

<sup>9</sup> All the terminologies in bracket are the Sanskrit or Indian equivalents to the Johannine terms.

<sup>10</sup> “Chandogya Upanishad belongs to Tandy School under Kauthuma Samhita of the Samaveda. Out of the ten chapters of the Chandogya Brahmana; chapters third to tenth are considered as the Chandogya Upanishad.” See <http://vedicheritage.gov.in/upanishads/chandogyopanishad/>, accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Though there are similarities between the Hindu understanding of *avatāra* and Christian understanding of incarnation, Keshub Chandra Sen and Upadhyaya were against the trend of considering both as same. Boyd says, “There is only one Incarnation, that is Christ, for he is unique and in him God himself, *Parabrahman* than whom there can be none higher, becomes incarnate.”



lay as it were asleep in God, is the Word of Creation, *Cit* (intelligence, wisdom), ever at work in the development of the created world, and in the fullness of time being born as a man in Jesus of Nazareth” (Boyd 1969/2000:28). Similarly, Brahmabandhav Upādhyāya (1861-1907) considered the Hindu concept of *Saccidānanda Brahman* on par with the Christian Trinity (Boyd 1969/2000:63-74). In his Sanskrit hymn—the *Hymn of the Incarnation*—Upādhyāya describes Christ as the *God-Man* and the *Logos*. Boyd puts it as follows: “Christ is the Image of God (*Brahman*) and in him, the eternal Word (Intelligence, *Cit*), the fullness of the Godhead, dwells. In the refrain, victory (*jai*) or glory is ascribed to him who is the true *Nara-Hari* (‘Man-God’)” (Boyd 1969/2000:78). Jesus the *Logos* can resonate with the *Sat* as he is one with the Brahman, *Cit* as he is the divine wisdom from above, the *Avatāra* as he came to establish righteousness and justice in the world, and the *Adisabda* as he is God’s eternal voice in the universe.

## **The Book of Signs (1:19-12:50)**

After the Prologue in 1:1-18, the narrator introduces the first major part of the Gospel called the *Book of Signs* (1:19-12:50; Brown 1966:xxviii-xxxix; Van Belle 1994; Thomaskutty 2015:1).<sup>12</sup> Raymond E. Brown divides this part into four sub-sections: first, the initial days of the revelation of Jesus to his disciples under different titles (1:19-51); second, the first and second miracles in Cana (chaps. 2-4); a third miracle, OT feasts and their replacements (chaps. 5-10); and a fourth miracle, the raising of Lazarus, and its aftermath (chaps. 11-12; Brown 2009:338-351).

In the first sub-section (1:19-51), Jesus’ name is revealed through various witnesses as “the lamb of God” (1:29-35), “Messiah” (1:41), “one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote” (1:45), and “Son of God” and “King of Israel” (1:49). Some of the key revelatory aspects and the universality of Jesus are made obvious in this section (Thomaskutty 2015:92). The second sub-section (chaps. 2-4) describes a circular mission journey of Jesus that begins in Cana (2:1-11), proceeds through Jerusalem (2:13-22) and Samaria (4:1-45), and ends in Cana (4:46-54). Jesus’ role and status as the giver of joy (2:1-11), great teacher (3:1-21; 4:1-45), and provider of life (4:46-54) are exemplified through the events here (Kanagaraj

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<sup>12</sup> Brown discusses a *Sēmeia-Quelle* or Sign Source in detail. Van Belle describes in detail the origin and development of the “Sēmeia Hypothesis.”



2005:97-163). The third sub-section (chaps. 5-10) focuses on the fulfillment of OT festivals in Jesus' ministry.

As the South Asian people observe festivals like Diwali, Onam, Pongal, Holi, Ramadan, and others, the Johannine narrative offers friendly and contextually relevant rhetoric to such readers. While the festival of Booths/Tabernacles (7:2, 37) is attached to the symbols of light and water ablution, the festival of Diwali is considered as a festival of light and water ablution is one of the significant aspects of Hindu spirituality (Singh 1994:210-227).<sup>13</sup> The fourth sub-section (chaps. 11-12) is crucial as the death and raising of Lazarus prepare readers for Jesus' death and the resurrection in the second major part of the Gospel (Thomaskutty 2015:368-404). As the South Asians value friendship at multiple levels, Jesus' friendship with Lazarus and his family energizes readers and they can identify with Jesus who mourns at the tomb of Lazarus.

An Indian/Asian can see a lot of contextual and ideological resonances between the Book of Signs (1:19-12:50) and Asian religious literature. Just like the Rāmāyana has been a perennial source of spiritual, cultural, and artistic inspiration for thousands of years, the stories of John inspire many with spiritual insights (Guthrie 1990:285),<sup>14</sup> cultural identification with the Johannine community (Brown 1979), and artistic inspiration.<sup>15</sup> As Rāma, Sītā, and Hanumān have inspired millions of people with the deepest and tenderest love, reverence, and devotion, John's Jesus, the Johannine community, and the *Paracletos* inspire many across the globe (Subramaniam 2017:v).

As Vālmīki the great sage presents Rāma, the ancient idol of the heroic ages, as the embodiment of truth and morality, the ideal son and husband, and above all the ideal king (Subramaniam 2017:v), the Beloved Disciple presents Jesus as the protagonist, the embodiment of truth (1:17; 14:6) and great morality, the ideal son of God (1:34, 49), the bridegroom figure of the Johannine community (3:29), and the ideal king of Israel (1:49). Kamala Subramaniam says, "'Drama' is the first word which comes to the mind while reading the great epic, *Mahabharata*. 'Bhakti,' on the other hand, is the thread running through the entire narration of the *Bhagavata*. 'Pain' is the predominant emotion in the

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Diwali-Hindu-festival>, accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Clement of Alexandria considers it as a *Spiritual Gospel*. See Hypotyposes, cited in Eusebius, *HE* 6.14.7.

<sup>15</sup> Refer to <http://jyotiartashram.blogspot.com/>, accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020.





*Rāmāyana*” (Subramaniam 2017:ix). The Johannine narrator combines the aspects of drama, bhakti, and pain and suffering at their best in the portrayal of Jesus.

The seven signs in the Book of Signs (2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-18; 6:1-15; 6:16-21; 9:1-41; 11:1-54) are told within the framework of the grand sign, the incarnation of the Word (1:1-18). A similar phenomenon is seen in the Hindu scriptures. The *Rāmāyana* and *Mahabharata* as well as the eighteen Puranas depict the astonishing power of divine beings. Hayes states that “Whether it was Arjun or Karna of the *Mahabharata* or Rama or Indrajit of the *Rāmāyana*, their accomplishments were miraculous . . . Lord Vishnu took ten incarnations, or avatars, inhuman, semi-human, and animal forms in order to cleanse the evil from this mundane world” (Hayes 2016:172). Similarly, Fiordalis states that “Exhibitions of superhuman power are often portrayed as evidence of holiness in Buddhist literature. Superhuman powers of various kinds result from developing the techniques of meditation that lead to the attainment of the highest goals of the Buddhist path” (Fiordalis 2008:208-209). While miracles and superhuman powers are part and parcel of Hindu, Buddhist, and other traditions, Jesus’ performance of signs to reveal his identity is identical to the South Asian realities and they are presented in a gnomic and universalistic fashion (see Hargreaves 1975).

### **The Book of Glory (13:1-20:31)**

After the “Book of Signs,” the second major part of the Gospel is called the “Book of Glory” (13:1-20:31). Brown sub-divides this section into three parts: first, the Last Supper and Jesus’ Last Discourse (chaps. 13-17); second, Jesus’ Passion and Death (chaps. 18-19); and third, Four Scenes in Jerusalem and Faith in the Risen Jesus (20:1-29), followed by the Gospel Conclusion/Statement of the purpose of writing (20:30-31; Brown 2009:351-360). As a person influenced by biblical thought, Mahatma Gandhi’s speeches reflect the ideals of Jesus. In his *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi emphasizes the aspects of love, truth, non-violence, integrity, and morality (see Gandhi 1968). These are some of the core values of Jesus’ teaching in John 13-17.

While the Book of Signs ends with Mary anointing the feet of Jesus (12:1-8), the Book of Glory begins with Jesus washing the feet of the disciples (13:1-20). While the Book of Signs ends with the death and the raising of Lazarus (11:1-54), the Book of Glory takes our attention to the death and the resurrection of Jesus (chaps. 18-20). While the Book of Signs



ends with Jesus' weeping over Lazarus at his tomb (11:35), the Book of Glory ends with Mary Magdalene's weeping at the tomb of Jesus (20:10-18).<sup>16</sup> Thus, there is integral connectivity between the two major parts of the Gospel. The longer section in chaps. 13-17 follows the literary style of *farewell discourses* or *testaments* of famous men (Collins 1990:221). John shares some of the literary features parallel to *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* that contains the last words of each of the patriarchs to their people (Beasley-Murray 1999:222-223). The discourse traditions of Sri Buddha (see Walshe 1995),<sup>17</sup> Guru Nanak (see Nayar 2012), Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa<sup>18</sup>, and Swami Vivekananda<sup>19</sup> are well-known. As Jesus' discourse was a blueprint for his disciples, the Indian religious leaders used their discourses to persuade their followers.

The Farewell Discourse begins with Jesus' foot washing (13:1-20) and ends with his high priestly prayer (17:1-26). As Jesus exemplified his servant leadership through the paradigm of foot washing, the servant leadership of Gandhi and Mother Teresa are popularly known across the globe. In 17:1-26, Jesus prays for himself (vv. 1-5), his disciples (vv. 6-19), and future believers (vv. 20-26). In the South Asian context, prayers are usually done for personal edification and relatives, friends, and the world at large. One of the Hindu prayers from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.28) proceeds as follows: Lead me from untruth (*asat*) to truth (*sat*); lead me from darkness (*tamas*) to light (*jyotih*), and lead me from death (*mrutyu*) to immortality (*amrita*). While *asat*, *tamas*, and *mrutyu* refer to temporality or impermanence, *sat*, *jyotih*, and *amrita* refer to the eternal and hence to Brahman and Atman.<sup>20</sup> Many scholars connect this prayer with the utterance of Jesus: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (14:6). The prayers of Jesus in John make God's presence known universally.

<sup>16</sup> These striking literary interconnections between the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory is rhetorical in the process of interpreting the Gospel as a whole.

<sup>17</sup> Buddha's first discourse contains the Noble Eightfold Paths and Four Noble Truths. See here: <https://www.vridhamma.org/discourses/first-discourse-of-buddha>.

<sup>18</sup> Sri Ramakrishna broke the frontiers of Hinduism, glided through the paths of Islam and Christianity, and attained the highest realization. Just like Jesus, he chose to speak in simple language using parables and metaphors by way of illustration, drawn from the observation of nature and ordinary things of daily use. See more details: <https://belurmath.org/sri-ramakrishna/>.

<sup>19</sup> Speech delivered by him on September 11, 1893, at the First World's Parliament of Religion on the site of the present Art Institute in Chicago. In his speech, he introduced Hinduism to America and called for religious tolerance and an end to fanaticism.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://indiafacts.org/from-darkness-to-light/>, accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020. The equivalent words used in bracket are in Sanskrit language.





The Passion Narrative in chaps. 18-19 describes Jesus' betrayal and arrest (18:1-11), the trial before Annas and Caiaphas (18:12-14), Peter's three denials (18:15-27), the trial before Pilate (18:28-19:15), the crucifixion and death (19:16-37), and the burial (19:38-42). The irony of the cross is revealed through the final utterances of Jesus: first, while his own people did not care for him (1:10-11), he protects his own (17:11-12) and cares for his mother (19:26b); second, at the point of death, he entrusts a divine responsibility to the Beloved Disciple (19:27); third, the giver of living water is thirsty and the provider of the new wine/the true vine is given sour wine (19:28-29; cf. 2:1-11; 15:1-5); and fourth, irrespective of the worldly persecution, he accomplishes the task of the Father (19:30; Green 1992:161-163).

The hour/lifting up/glorification of the Son of Man is demonstrated on the cross. Just as Jesus died as an innocent martyr, the Sikh tradition (especially *Adi Granth*) makes mention of *śahīdī* or *śahādat* (in Punjabi and in Perso-Arabic) which means a "witness." In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century history of Sikhism, Sikhs fought against a series of murderous foes whose sole goal was the extermination of Sikhism (Fenech 2018:205). Fenech comments that "These were struggles that became a part of a Sikh's *sevā*, or a selfless service to humanity, service that is essential to securing salvation, according to the Sikh Gurus" (Fenech 2018:205). Jesus' death that marks the victory of righteousness and truth is reminiscent of historical events that we see in Sikh history. Indians can also identify the glorious death of Jesus as they cherish the martyrdoms of heroic figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, and others.

John 20:1-29 describes the resurrection of Jesus and the succeeding events. The section begins with an introduction, consisting of Mary Magdalene's coming to the tomb, finding it empty, and reporting the news to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple (20:1-2; Brown 2009:359).<sup>21</sup> There are four scenes reported in the Jerusalem context: first, Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb and confirm the absence of Jesus' body (20:3-10); second, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb where two angels are now present (20:11-18); third, on Easter Sunday night the disciples are in a place where the doors are locked for the

<sup>21</sup> Note that Peter's confession in John 6 presents him as "returning the keys of the kingdom" to Jesus, reflecting a spirit-based corrective to rising institutionalism in the late first-century situation.



fear of the Jews (20:19-25); and fourth, a week later the disciples are in the same place with Thomas present (20:26-29; Brown 2009:359-360).

The purpose statement makes it clear that the goal of the gospel has been to have people come to faith or increase in faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and through this faith to possess eternal life in his name (20:30-31; Brown 2009:360). As the Brahman is presented as the eternal being in the Hindu traditions, the Gospel of John depicts God/Jesus as eternal and universalistic (Egenes and Reddy 2002:4-6; Thrasher 1993:6-7). This aspect of the Fourth Gospel can be aligned within the religious aspirations of the South Asian communities.

In the Book of Glory, pain and glory develop simultaneously. Jesus the protagonist and those who believe/follow him are in pain. But Jesus' suffering brings glory; the shameful cross becomes God's way of salvation. The glory of God/Jesus is further revealed through the resurrection placed at the climax of the story. The story of the *Rāmāyana* has a similar narrative dynamic. Subramaniam says, "Pain is the monochord which can be heard throughout [*Rāmāyana*]: and yet, this very pain is ennobling, purifying, and satisfying. *Rāmāyana* is a threnody filled to the brim, with noble thoughts, noble sentiments, noble characters, not one of whom is spared the experience of pain" (Subramaniam 2017:ix). As in the case of *Rāmāyana*, John's narrative is a threnody that encompasses melody, comedy, and tragedy. In that way, the South Asian realities and literary features are part and parcel of the Gospel of John.

## **The Epilogue (21:1-25)**

The epilogue of John is set in the Galilean context and this section can be sub-divided into three parts: first, the appearance of Jesus and the event of miraculous fishing (21:1-14); second, the saying of the risen Jesus to Peter and the Beloved Disciple (21:15-23); and third, the conclusion (21:24-25; Brown 2009:360-361). Just as the Gospel has a double introduction (1:1-18; 1:19-51), it has a double conclusion too (20:30-31; 21:1-25 [especially vv. 24-25]). In the first part of this chapter (21:1-14), the gathering of seven disciples seems symbolical as this group of disciples represents the future community, the Church (Schnackenburg 1982:3:78-79). While others do not recognize Jesus, the Beloved Disciple exclaims, "It is the Lord!" (21:7). Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson said, "Even after his resurrection, Jesus is



not easily recognized, and the disciples must learn to recognize Jesus all over again” (Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson 2001:197). The second part of the chapter (21:15-23) focuses on two major characters, Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Even as Peter denied Jesus thrice before a charcoal fire (18:15-27), he is reinstated in love and prepared for future mission (21:15-17). While the Beloved Disciple recognizes the Lord (21:7), Peter is instructed to follow him (21:19, 22). The same command of Jesus (that is, “Follow me”) to Philip in 1:43 and to Peter in 21:19 and 22 introduces a larger inclusion to the Gospel. After a conclusion in 20:30-31, another recap statement is added (21:24-25). The Beloved Disciple is identified “as the witness who stands behind the Gospel narrative and certifies the truth of his testimony” (Brown 2009:361). In that sense, the entire story is narrated through the perspective of the Beloved Disciple.

The Fourth Gospel even demonstrates several conceptual and ideological similarities beyond the South Asian context. A comparison may be drawn between the disciples in the Fourth Gospel and the disciples of Confucius who attended to their teacher while following him. Confucius and his disciples endured many hardships and he encouraged them to stand firm in times of trial.<sup>22</sup> He warned them to keep away from greed and laziness and built-in them moral and ethical principles to lead a renewed life in their society.<sup>23</sup> In that way, Jesus and Confucius were teachers of great lessons. Just as the oral thoughts of Confucius spread through his disciples to future generations, the Johannine community developed the oral traditions of Jesus according to the growing demands. As the Beloved Disciple reinterpreted his master’s teachings, the teachings of Confucius were later on compiled as *Analects*.<sup>24</sup>

### **Some of the Significant Aspects of the Gospel**

The following section is an attempt to discuss some of the significant aspects and themes of the Fourth Gospel, such as discipleship, signs, ‘I AM’ sayings, Characterization, mysticism, and dualism, in closer relationship with the South Asian realities.

### **Johannine Discipleship and the South Asian Realities**

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<sup>22</sup> See more details about here: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>, accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://classroom.synonym.com/roles-of-the-disciples-in-confucianism-12086182.html>, accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.

<sup>24</sup> See <https://classroom.synonym.com/roles-of-the-disciples-in-confucianism-12086182.html>, accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.



The call of the first disciples (1:19-51) provides us with a brief understanding of Johannine discipleship. John the Baptist introduces Jesus to the world: “Behold, the Lamb of God” (1:36; cf. 1:29). His witness about Jesus resulted in two of his disciples following Jesus. Here we see the first record of people *following Jesus* (1:37). The verb “follow” serves as a metaphor for discipleship throughout the Fourth Gospel (cf. 1:37, 43; 8:12; 10:4-5, 15, 27; 12:26; 21:19, 22; Thomaskutty 2016:5-21). Nicodemus and the woman at the well bring to the fore two models of discipleship, one of them being a member of the Jewish religious elite (3:1-21) and the other a woman living in a Samaritan village (4:1-26). Andrew (1:35-42; 6:8; 12:22), Philip (1:43-44; 6:8; 12:22), Peter (1:40-42; 6:66-70; 13:6-10; 18:15-26; 20:1-10; 21:1-23), the man born blind (9:1-41), Thomas (11:16; 14:5; 20:24-28; 21:2), the family of Lazarus (including Mary and Martha; 11:1-54; 12:1-8), the Beloved Disciple (13:23; 19:26-27; 20:2; 21:7, 20), Mary Magdalene (19:25; 20:1-18) and others follow Jesus (Wilkins 1992:176-182). The disciples are those who believe, follow, and worship Jesus. The entire Gospel is placed in an *inclusio* of Jesus’ commands to follow him in 1:43 and in 21:19/22.

The Guru-Shishya tradition of India is old and takes us back to the Upanishadic period (Kohli 1993:18). Just as Jesus was a *walking teacher* and the disciples followed him in a Peripatetic style,<sup>25</sup> the Asian religious teachers like Dronacharya, Buddha, Mahavira, and the Sikh Gurus imparted knowledge to the disciples while they walked together. Guru Dronacharya was a legendary and illustrious teacher in the *Drona Parva* of the *Mahabharata* (Vyasa 2013; Basker 2016:78). He taught royal princes of both the clans, Pandavas, and Kauravas. The Guru-Shishya relationship was emphasized in the Sikh religion. The Punjabi word *sikh* (“learner”) is related to the Sanskrit *shishya* (“disciple”). After a succession of ten gurus beginning from Guru Nanak, the *Guru Granth Sahib* became the final Guru.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Mahavira and Buddha had a large number of followers. Both in the Johannine and the Indian/Asian religious traditions, following the master is considered as one of the significant aspects of spirituality.

<sup>25</sup> Peripatetic School is “the school founded by Aristotle in Athens in 336 BCE, supposedly named after the peripatos or covered walk in the garden of the Lyceum, where he lectured. Apart from Aristotle, its important members were Theophrastus, Eudemus of Rhodes, and Strato of Lampsacus.” See <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100317855>, accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2020.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Guru-Sikhism>, accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020.



### **The Signs and Their Significance in South Asia**

The signs recorded in the Fourth Gospel function dynamically as they contribute semantically to its narrative framework. Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding place in order to solve a family's pressing problem in an honour and shame socio-cultural context and to launch his public ministry (2:1-11; Beasley-Murray 1999:32-37). By healing an official's son, he encourages the official to progress in his journey of faith (4:46-54; Barrett 1978:205-208). By feeding the five thousand, he demonstrates his compassion for all of humanity (6:1-15) and by walking on the water, he reveals his power and authority over all of nature (6:16-21; Beasley-Murray 1999:85-96). In healing a man born blind, he shows the reader how such a sign can nurture a person's faith development (9:1-41; Barrett 1978:292-304), and by restoring Lazarus to life, he gives the reader a sense of his concern for all who belong to the community of God (11:1-44; Thomaskutty 2017b:67-68). And by enabling a miraculous catch of fish, he reveals his Lordship to the disciples (21:6-11).<sup>27</sup> The above-mentioned situations are echoed in the Asian context where divine signs are significant.

In the words of Blackburn, the Synoptic *dynameis* (Greek; "deeds of power") and the Johannine *sēmeia* (Greek; "signs") function in different ways. While the Synoptic evangelists present *pistis* (Greek) on the part of the suppliants (or their representatives) as a prerequisite for receiving miraculous help (Mark 2:5; 6:5-6), in John, the signs ideally result in *pistis* (Blackburn 1992:550). As John's Jesus is open-ended and unconditional in performing miraculous signs, the multi-cultural and pluralistic Asian communities can embrace him wholeheartedly. The Asian context is known for the large numbers of sick and the poor, who seek a healer and a provider like Jesus. While Jesus engages in the mission of God, he uses the signs as a means of revealing his glory and to build a holistic community (Thomaskutty 1997:67-68).

### **The "I AM" Sayings of Jesus in the South Asian Context**

In his ministry, the Jesus of John's Gospel grounds his public discourses in equally public actions (Burge 1992:354-356). His actions and speech develop simultaneously within the Johannine narrative framework. One who feeds five thousand people with physical bread (6:1-15) declares himself to be bread from heaven (6:22-59; Van der Watt 2007b:186-204).

<sup>27</sup> Above all, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead reveals his glory to the world (20:1-29).



The feast of Tabernacles is actualized by the presence of Jesus as “the light of the world” (8:12; Ball 1996:155). One who gives physical sight to the blind (9:1-7) is introduced, again, as “the light of the world” (9:5; Ball 1996:80-93). When the sheep are sent out of the synagogue (9:34), Jesus is ready to receive them as “the door of the sheep” (10:7; Thomaskutty 2015:341-345). The leaders of the synagogue are mere hirelings (10:12-13), but Jesus shows himself to be “the good shepherd” (10:11, 14, 16) by resolving the struggles of the man born blind (Thomaskutty 2015:310-340). One who raises the dead (11:38-44) is himself “the resurrection and the life” (11:25). One who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6) prepares a way and a place in heaven for those who follow him (14:2-3; Ball 1996:119-128). One who provides the best wine (2:1-11) is himself “the true vine” (15:1-11; Ball 1996:60-145). Thus, Jesus’ utterances are backed up by his actions.

In the Asian context, people highly value those who walk their talk. In religion, politics, and culture such people are given heroic images in society. Politicians who make promises but remain unable to fulfil them are not considered respectable figures. Asian figures like Mahatma Gandhi,<sup>28</sup> Malala Yousafzai,<sup>29</sup> Pandita Ramabhai,<sup>30</sup> and Mother Teresa<sup>31</sup> are known not only for their rhetoric but also for their actions for community development. In this context, the Johannine Jesus can be identified as an ideal model for human transformation in the pluralistic context of Asia (Basker 2016:75-77). Johannine spirituality is wider and inclusive of both the rhetoric and the actions.

## **Johannine Characters in the South Asian Context**

Within the narrative framework, John’s characterization is extremely effective. The various characters are memorably presented with the help of a wide range of literary devices and narrative techniques (Thomaskutty 2016:17). One who reads the Johannine story paradigmatically may identify its characters from his/her own context. For example, an Indian or a Nepali reader may identify Nicodemus with a higher-caste Hindu or a Buddhist who seeks to understand Jesus (Blomberg 2001:91-95). When a reader minister in a village,

<sup>28</sup> B. R. Nanda, “Mahatma Gandhi,” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mahatma-Gandhi>, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Refer to <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2014/yousafzai/facts/>, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/obituaries/pandita-ramabai-overlooked.html>, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.

<sup>31</sup> See <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1979/teresa/biographical/>, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.





addressing the lower-caste women of the region, s/he may identify them with the Samaritan woman (Moloney 1989/1998:113-150). “Secret” Christians, those who believe in Jesus but do not take the public step of identifying with the Christian community, seem much like Joseph of Arimathea (19:38-42). The blind man, the family of Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, Nathanael, Peter, Philip, and other characters bear a strong resemblance to people we come across daily. This is the peculiar narrative dynamics of John’s storytelling (Thomaskutty 2016:18). In our own reading, we find the Johannine characters to be quite Asian.

The story of Nathanael (1:43-51) resembles very much the story of Buddha, and the story of the Samaritan woman (4:1-26) resembles in many ways various Buddhist traditions. Similarly, the invalid at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18) and the man born blind who was healed in Jerusalem (9:1-41) are like the poor beggars in and around the temples, mosques, pagodas, gurudwaras, and other religious centres in Asian countries. Nathanael as a person who sits under the fig tree (1:48b) and is enlightened to recognize Jesus as the “Son of God” and the “King of Israel” (1:49) resembles in many ways Buddha, who sat under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya and was enlightened (Blomberg 2001:83).<sup>32</sup>

Jesus who comes to the Samaritan village and asks a woman for water corresponds in many ways to Ananda, a famous disciple of Buddha, who asked a Matanga Caste woman for water at a well (Chacko 2018:3). The social distancing between communities is seen in her question, “How do *you* ask water of *me*, an *outcaste* who may not touch thee without contamination? (cf. John 4:9)” (Narasu 2009:84). Ananda replied: “My sister, I ask not of thee thy caste, I ask for water to drink” (cf. John 4:10, 13-14). He breaks the socio-cultural and religious barriers in drinking the water.<sup>33</sup> The “othering” by social distancing is transcended and this daring action crossed the binary spaces of *me* and *you*, to a third space, where both could engage in their conversation and interaction (Chacko 2018:3; Thomaskutty 2017a:64-68). Ananda thanked her and showered on her a blessing from Buddha and went away. This girl, attracted by the defiant action of the Buddhist Bhikshu, followed his

<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.britannica.com/plant/Bo-tree>, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.

<sup>33</sup> This story is described in the Matangi Sutra of Buddhist Sources. This encounter gave birth to Shurangana Sutra. *Chandalabhikshuki* is a well acclaimed Malayalam poem written by Kumaranasan (1873-1924), a famous poet from Kerala. This is a poetic representation of a well-encounter story from Buddhism. The poet sets the time around 2500 years back. This incident happens in North India, in a village near the place called Sravasti.



footprints and reached the Buddhist Sangha Viharam (Ashram; Chacko 2018:3; Thomaskutty 2017a:64-68). Encounters near wells are usual in Asian village contexts as women are expected to fetch water for the whole day from the village well. The local and the universal are interwoven throughout this Gospel. This peculiar feature of the Gospel makes it both local and universal in the context of Asia (Thomaskutty 2020:3-14).

## **Mysticism in John and in the Asian Religions**

The spirituality reflected in John's Gospel has much in common with the mystical traditions of the Asian religions. The following aspects can be considered significant in that regard: first, at the heart of Johannine theology we witness a union between God/Jesus and human beings (6:56; 15:1-17);<sup>34</sup> second, Jesus' vertical and horizontal relationships are reflected through his mystical expressions like "All that is mine is yours; all that is yours is mine" (17:10; also see 17:21-23; cf. 14:7-12; McPolin 2020:27-30); third, as a Gospel of belief and love, the aspects such as believing in and loving God are emphasized to sustain the union between God and believers (3:16; 6:47; chaps. 14-16; Basker 2016:xvii; McPolin 2020:30-31);<sup>35</sup> fourth, the language John uses like "'having fellowship' (Greek; *koinōnia*) with the Father and the Son," "to be born of God" or to be "children of God" (1:13), and "I know mine and mine know me" (10:14; 17:3) reveal an integral relationship (McPolin 2020:31-32); fifth, the 'knowing,' 'seeing,' and 'believing' aspects of the Gospel make it more contemplative as it demands a deeper level of reflection on the meaning of Christ for our lives (McPolin 2020:32-33); sixth, the imageries like 'light' (1:9; 8:12; 9:5), 'vine and the branches' (15:1-15) and others express the intimacy of communion with Christ forcefully (McPolin 2020:33-34); and seventh, the binding communion between the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the believer and the inseparable unity is emphasized through the formula of immanence (Schnackenburg 1980:2:63; Ashton 1991/1993:54; McPolin 2020:34-35). These aspects of the Fourth Gospel resonate in several ways in the Asian thought world.

The Johannine idea of oneness with God has resonances in the Asian religious and philosophical traditions. While Hinduism expresses the view of "Atman is Brahman" ("the

<sup>34</sup> James McPolin, "Johannine Mysticism," 26-27, <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/18McPolin.pdf>, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Basker sees the ideas of mystical love, unity, oneness, life in fullness, and others have close affinity to Hindu spirituality. Basker says, "Several Christian converts have found similarities between Hinduism and the Gospel of John and have proceeded to interpret this Gospel from an Indian-Hindu perspective."



soul is one with God”; Dalal 2010/2014:234),<sup>36</sup> Mahayana Buddhism has the idea of *tathātā* which can be described as “thisness of reality.”<sup>37</sup> The teachings of Confucius and the Sufi tradition of Islam emphasize mystical experiences. Sankara, one of the Indian classical proponents of *Advaita* (non-dualism) philosophy, sees an eternal union between Brahma the Absolute and the Atman or pure consciousness (*chaitanyam*; Dalal 2010/2014:6). The *Advaita* interpretation of Sankara was later on modified by Ramanuja through his *Vishishtadvaita* (qualified non-dualism) interpretation of Vedanta.<sup>38</sup> Ramanuja was critical of Sankara’s impersonal *nirguna* Brahman concept (Dalal 2010/2014:334-335; Boyd 1969/2000:19-20). S. Radhakrishnan states that “Shankara and Ramanuja were both great exponents of Vedanta, examined the same texts, and based their ideas on the same assumptions, yet reached different conclusions” (Dalal 2010/2014:457-458). While Sankara emphasized God’s existence as the absolute reality over against the relatively real status of human beings and the world, Ramanuja concluded that a personal relationship between God and human beings is possible. John perceives God as the Supreme or ultimate reality; but, the evangelist neither portrays God as *nirguna* nor present human beings as totally dependent on God (McPolin 2020:25-26). John teaches that human personality can either accept or reject God; but, a union is possible between God and human beings through the initiative of knowing God, doing his work, and devoting oneself to faith (Dalal 2010/2014:457-458). Though John sustains certain commonalities with the non-dualistic and the qualified non-dualistic trends of Sankara and Ramanuja, the narrator expounds his thought-world within a dualistic framework.

<sup>36</sup> The *Mahavakyas* of Upanishads like *Aham Brahma-asmi* (“I am Brahman”), *Tat tvam asi* (“You are That”), *Ayamatma Brahma* (“the Atma is Brahman”), and *Brahma satyam, jagan mithya* (“Brahman is real, the world is unreal”) make it affirm the oneness aspect of Hinduism.

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Jo Rudy, “What is Mysticism? Definition and Examples,” <https://www.learnreligions.com/mysticism-definition-4768937>, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020.

<sup>38</sup> The Fourth Gospel deals with the indwelling of God in human beings at various points. We find it in the concept of Logos in the prologue to the Gospel (1:1-18), then in the Farewell Discourses (chaps. 13-17) where we have the Paraclete passages in which Jesus speaks of God, Jesus himself and the Holy Spirit coming and indwelling in the believers of Jesus (14:15-24). The metaphor of the vine and the branches (15:1-17) is also very significant in this respect. The high priestly prayer of Jesus (chap. 17) also throws a lot of light into the divine indwelling in human beings who believe in Jesus. See Philip, *History and Theology of the Gospel according to St. John*.



### Dualism in John and the Asian Context

The Fourth Gospel is well-known for its dualistic framework. In John, this trend begins with the pair of light and darkness being placed at the outset (1:5; Van der Watt 2007a:30-32; Anderson 2011:36-38). Other dualistic pairs in John include: above and below (8:23), spirit and flesh (3:6), life (eternal) and death (3:36), belief and disbelief (3:18), truth and falsehood (8:44-47), heaven and earth (3:31), God and Satan (13:27), and Israel and “the Jews” (1:19 and 47; Kappelle 2014:84). As in Judaism, John develops a *modified dualism* that affirms God’s sovereign rule as an overcomer of evil (Orton 1999:7). Scholars, including Bauckham, observe similarities between Johannine dualism and that of the OT (Gen 1:3-5; Isa 9:2; 42:6-7; 60:1-3), Qumran (1QS 3.3-4.26), and Gnostic writings (Bauckham 2015:117-118). John’s trend of dualism has many parallels in the Asian context.

Among the Asian religions, Zoroastrianism reflects a complete separation of good and evil at the cosmic and moral levels. Cosmic dualism refers to the ongoing battle between Good (*Ahura Mazda*) and Evil (*Andra Mainyu*) within the universe. Moral dualism refers to the opposition of good and evil in the mind of humankind. In Zoroastrianism, good and evil are equal and opposite realities.<sup>39</sup> In that sense, the propositions of three Asian religious/philosophical schools are noteworthy: Zoroastrianism follows an *unqualified dualism*; Sankara’s *Advaita* philosophy advocates an *unqualified non-dualism*, and Ramanuja proposes a *qualified non-dualism*. John maintains a dualistic framework as in Zoroastrianism; but, he distances himself from Zoroastrianism through his creativity of setting a qualified dualism.

John interprets God as the absolute reality and suggests a union between God and the human beings, as it is in *Advaita*; but, he considers neither a non-dualistic existence of God nor that God is nirguna or without attributes.<sup>40</sup> John proposes a personal relationship between God and human beings and suggests a *Bhakti Marga*, as in Ramanuja; but, John goes beyond the qualified non-dualism of *Vishishtadvaita*.<sup>41</sup> In his propositions, John is closer in many ways to the principles of Madhava, a 12<sup>th</sup> century CE interpreter of Vedanta, who suggested a

<sup>39</sup> See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/beliefs/dualism.shtml>, accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>40</sup> In Sankara’s *Advaita* philosophy, God is considered as the single reality without a second and for him God is nirguna Brahman.

<sup>41</sup> Ramanuja proposes a qualified non-dualism that is distinct from the qualified dualism of John.



*Dvaita* philosophy (Dalal 2010/2014:227-228). Madhava considered the supremacy of Brahman and the separate existence of human beings/the world. His dualism was not true dualism in the sense of two equal powers (Dalal 2010/2014:128). Here we see a connection between the qualified dualism of John (1:5) with the qualified dual existence suggested by Madhava. This comparison of various religious and philosophical traditions helps us to understand John's accommodation of ideas and his distinctive emphasis in relation to the Asian thought world.

## **Conclusion**

The Gospel of John demonstrates several conceptual and ideological similarities with the contextual realities of South Asia. This accommodative aspect was often overlooked in the classical interpretations of the Fourth Gospel in the past. The four parts of the Gospel (the Prologue, the Book of Signs, the Book of Glory, and the Epilogue) and their framework demonstrate certain clues regarding the similarities between the Gospel's thought-world and the South Asian ideologies. This quality of the Gospel fits well within the spectrum of the South Asian socio-political, religious and spiritual realities. The ideology of discipleship, the semantics of signs, the "I AM" sayings, characters and characterization, the mystical and religious aspects, and the dualistic framework of the Gospel fit well within the ideological framework of the South Asian context. The universalistic linguistic and literary style, the appearance of characters as representative figures, the conceptual linkage between the South Asian religions and philosophical ideologies, and the open-ended outlook of the signs and symbols can go well with the contextual aspects of South Asia. Hence, a careful reading of the text is necessitated in order to derive sense in the twenty-first-century realities.

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