



7) Chapters 9 & 10

The man born blind

There are plenty of small details to note in this vivid story, some of them reminders of what we've learnt before.

i) Do you remember the range of meanings of *ego eimi* ("I am") – sometimes an echo of the divine name (YHWH)? Chapter Ten has two of the famous 'I am' sayings – "I am the gate" and "I am the good shepherd". But chapter nine has perhaps the most secular (theologically the least significant) example of the phrase in the Gospel:

"He kept saying '**I am the man**'". [9.9]

ii) An interesting, and painful, little word crops up in both of this month's chapters:

"Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And **they were divided**." [9.16]

"Again the Jews **were divided** because of these words." [10.19]

The Greek word is *schism*, and it occurs in just two other places in the New Testament. The first is the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus talks of a new patch 'tearing' an old piece of clothing when it shrinks, and the second is Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, which was being divided by false teaching.

Although it has come to refer to the sad divisions between Christians of different opinions (starting within a few years of Jesus' death), the word 'schism' originally referred to the much greater division between those who believed in Jesus and those who didn't.

iii) One of the Greek words used to determine the date of John's gospel is found in this chapter:

"... the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be **put out of the synagogue**." [9.22]

The Jewish 'excommunication' of Christians, pronouncing them to be *aposynagōgos*, is generally dated to the twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions, against 'the Heretics', in c. 85-90 AD:

"For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and the Nazarenes ... perish as in a moment, and be blotted out from the book of life ..."

The technical term *aposynagōgos* occurs three times in John's gospel (and nowhere else in the New Testament) and is seen by many as an indication that this part of the Gospel at least must date from no earlier than the last decade of the first century.

iv) There's a very interesting little piece of dialogue towards the end of this chapter:

"When Jesus found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, **sir**? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, '**Lord**, I believe.' And he worshipped him." [9.35b-38]

The same words "sir" and "Lord" in these verses translate just one Greek word, *Kyrie*. It's a neat example of how a little word can carry a range of meaning from the everyday to the theologically profound.

I am the good shepherd

Again, there are plenty of interesting details in the passage.

i) John never uses the word ‘parable’ – though it occurs literally dozens of times in the synoptic gospels. Instead he, just occasionally, uses the word *paroimia*:

“Jesus used this **figure of speech** with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”
[10.6]

The word means ‘proverb’, and was the usual word for the Jewish method (in the Old Testament and by the rabbis) of teaching through pithy sayings.

ii) Perhaps the most important phrase in this chapter to be obscured, if not lost, in translation comes in its most famous verses:

“I am the **good** shepherd ...” [10. 11,14]

Greek has two quite different words for ‘good’ – *kalos* and *agathos*. The second of these, *agathos*, means morally good, and is only rarely applied to particular people – even Jesus challenged a questioner who described him as ‘agathos’! *Kalos* on the other hand, which is the word used here, literally means ‘beautiful’: it has a sense more of ‘ideal’ or ‘admirable’ – “I am the model shepherd”.

The best summary of this important word is that it means that Jesus is giving us an example to follow.

iii) Jesus says twice that he is the “good shepherd” – first because he gives his life for the sheep, and secondly:

“I am the good shepherd. I **know** my own and my own **know** me, just as the Father **knows** me and I **know** the Father ...” [10. 14,15a]

Like many other languages, Greek has two words for ‘I know’ – *oida* and *ginōskō* (the French ‘savoir’ and ‘connaitre’). We met them both in a single verse in chapter twenty-one a few months ago. The word here, *ginōskō*, means to know personally, to ‘have a relationship with’.

iv) Two little word-plays are hidden in the second half of the chapter:

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one **flock**, one **shepherd**.” [10.16]

The words ‘flock’ and ‘shepherd’ are *poimnē* and *poimēn* – ‘sheep-herd’ and ‘shepherd’. The unity of Christians is based on the fact that for all our different opinions we follow one shepherd.

The other word-play has a darker tone:

“Jesus said ... ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd **lays down his life** for the sheep’. ... The Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you **keep us in suspense**? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’” [10. 11,24]

The phrase translated “keep us in suspense” is a rare idiom. (We’re not even quite sure what it means; the modern Greek equivalent means to “make us angry” .. to “get up someone’s nose”.) Literally it translates as “to take away our life” – so the Jews are actually saying “Come on, you keep talking about giving up *your* life .. you’re starting to take away *ours*!”.

v) Our last verse has had more books written about it, and arguments held over it, than almost any other verse in the Bible:

“The Father and I are **one**.” [10.30]

We could spend the next month discussing that .. and we can spend the next few minutes doing so if you like. My only contribution (at this stage!) is to remind you of John 14.28 (‘The Father is greater than I’), and the fact that ‘one’ in the verse above is neuter, not masculine – *hen*, not *heis*. Enjoy!

Next time ... Chapter 17, the ‘High-Priestly Prayer’.