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Introduction to "John"

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John

From its first appearance, Bible students have recognized that the book of John is different from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). While one of the crucial reasons why John is so different is that it deals almost exclusively with incidents from Jesus' ministry that occurred in Judea rather than in Galilee like the other Gospels, there are also other surprising differences. John includes none of the parables contained in the other three Gospels, nor does he ever tell of the cure of a demoniac. John also has longer speeches, less reported miracles, and unique thematic emphases. But probably the most important difference is that it seeks to awaken faith (see *Purpose and Main Themes*). It is for this reason that Clement of Alexandria (second century AD) likely referred to it as the "spiritual gospel." These distinctions, however, are not contradictory. Instead, they supplement the other Gospels with additional strokes that contribute toward the picture of the infinite glory of Jesus Christ (John 21:25).

AUTHOR

The Gospel does not identify its author other than that it is the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7) who implicitly appears as the witness and source of the story. Good reasons exist, however, for accepting John the son of Zebedee as the beloved disciple and author, even though the book does not mention him by name: (1) It is clear that the author relies on eyewitness testimony; (2) only the twelve disciples were present at the Last Supper, so the beloved disciple had to be one of them (Matt. 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14; John 13:23); (3) it probably had to be either Peter, James, or John, since they were with Jesus at essential points of His ministry (Matt. 17:1; Mark 14:33); (4) James was martyred early (Acts 12:1, 2), and (5) Peter is not the beloved disciple because they appear together (John 20:2-8). Besides, early Christian writers identified the Gospel's author as John the son of Zebedee (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1).

DATE

Because of specific themes and vocabulary in the Gospel that seemed to derive from Hellenistic influence, scholars of the nineteenth century began to assume a composition for John during the late second century. However, in 1935, the Rylands Papyrus (P52), containing a few verses from John 18, was found in Egypt. The discovery was important because the papyrus dated to the early second century, suggesting that the Gospel had already been written and widely circulated by then. The following decade, in 1948, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran gave evidence that the themes and language used in John did in fact fit into a first-century Jewish background. It is now safe to say that the Gospel of John was written around AD 90.



Date of writing
AD 95-100

AUDIENCE

Chapter 21 of John suggests that the beloved disciple, Jesus' last living disciple, was soon going to die. Also, around the late first century, the most likely time of the Gospel's composition, Christians were starting to suffer persecution and perhaps even beginning to be excluded from worshipping in synagogues because of their belief in Jesus as the Son of God. All of this would have no doubt shaken the believers' faith. Thus, John writes to strengthen and encourage them in their belief in Jesus as the Son of God (see *Purpose and Main Themes*). According to Irenaeus, the disciple lived in Ephesus when he prepared the Gospel (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1), though it is difficult to say whether the intended audience was in fact that of Ephesus or not.

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

John 20:31 states the intent of the Gospel of John: "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." It is possible that the readers of the Gospel were facing a crisis of faith (see *Audience*), and John sought to strengthen their faith in Jesus. Therefore, one of the main themes in the Gospel is Jesus' identity and significance. He is the Word/Son of God in the flesh (1:1-3). As the ultimate revelation of God, He is the One who makes God known (1:18; 5:37, 38; 13:20; 14:6-9). At the time of His death, Jesus' enemies did their best to humiliate Him (18:22; 19:23, 24), but according to John, Jesus' death was His glorification, since He voluntarily gave Himself as the Lamb of God to save others, and God honored Him for it (10:17, 18; 12:23; 13:1, 31, 32; 17:4, 5). Finally, the emphasis that John places on the Holy Spirit is unique to the Gospels, especially His identification as the Paraclete (14:15-18, 25, 26; 15:26; 16:7-15). This emphasis is particularly significant for believers enduring a faith crisis because Jesus promised that they would never be alone (14:15-18).

STRUCTURE

After the prologue, the Gospel has two main parts: the first half describes Jesus' ministry, sometimes called the "Book of Signs" (1:19–12:50), and the second half, His passion (the crucifixion), referred to as the "Book of Glory" (13:1–20:31). In reality, the whole Gospel is a book of Jesus' signs (20:31), and it anticipates His passion and glorification from its very beginning (1:29). Therefore, when we read the Gospel of John, it is important to keep in mind that Jesus' entire ministry sheds light on His identity, and His identity helps us better understand His mission.

When reading John's Gospel, notice how it is different from the accounts we find in the Synoptic Gospels—particularly the way in which John focuses on revealing Jesus' identity and the unique relationship He shares with the Father.

OUTLINE:

- I. Prologue: The Word of God Incarnate (1:1-18)
- II. The Book of Signs: The Signs of the Messiah (1:19–12:50)
 - A. Early Ministry, Baptism, and Earliest Disciples (1:19-51)

- B. Inaugural Signs and Unlikely Disciples (2:1–4:54)
- C. Additional Signs and Growing Unbelief (5:1–10:42)
- D. The Climatic Sign That Leads to Faith and Hardened Disbelief (11:1–12:50)
- III. The Book of Glory: The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus (13:1–20:31)
 - A. The Last Supper (13:1-30)
 - B. Parting Counsel (13:31–16:33)
 - C. Jesus' Intercessory Prayer (17:1-26)
 - D. The Arrest, Trials, and Crucifixion of Jesus (18:1–19:42))
 - E. Resurrection and Reappearance of Jesus (20:1-31)
- IV. Epilogue: The Mission of the Church and Its Apostles (21:1-25)
 - A. Jesus Appears to Seven Disciples in Galilee (21:1-14)
 - B. Jesus Reinstates Peter (21:15-19)
 - C. Jesus and the Beloved Disciple (21:20-25)

ARCHAEOLOGY

Several archaeological finds have contributed to the credibility of the Gospel of John, along with the ones already mentioned that helped date the Gospel (see *Date*). The book has about 20 topographical references, including 16 that archaeologists have located such as Bethsaida (1:44), Capernaum (2:12; 4:46; 6:17, 24; its harbor, 6:24, 25; the synagogue, 6:59), Jacob's well (4:4-6), the Sheep Gate (5:2), and the pool of Bethesda (5:2). The impressive accuracy and detail with which John describes those places is evidence that someone with first-hand knowledge of Palestine and Judea before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 actually wrote the Gospel. This kind of description supports the reliability of the story reported in John. "He who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe" (19:35).