

The Gospel of John

INTRODUCTION:

This morning we begin our journey of learning how to study a book from beginning to end. Our book that will be our focus for most of the year, if not the entire year, is the Gospel of John. There is so much that we will cover in this book. I am looking forward to it because I've read it, and it is very exciting stuff for us to learn and grasp as a church.

Background Information by Dr. Bob Utley

OPENING STATEMENTS

- A. Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus' birth, Mark begins with His baptism, but John begins before the creation.
- B. John presents the full deity of Jesus of Nazareth from the first verse of the first chapter and repeats this emphasis throughout the Gospel. The Synoptic Gospels veil this truth until late in their presentations ("The Messianic Secret").
- C. Apparently John develops his Gospel in light of the basic affirmations of the Synoptic Gospels. He attempts to supplement and interpret the life and teachings of Jesus in light of the needs of the early church (late first century). He was the last apostolic witness.
- D. John seems to structure his presentation of Jesus the Messiah around
 1. seven miracles/signs and their interpretation
 2. twenty-seven interviews and/or dialogues with individuals
 3. certain worship and feast days
 - a. the Sabbath
 - b. the Passover (cf. chapters 5–6)
 - c. the Tabernacles (cf. chapters 7–10)
 - d. Hanukkah (cf. 10:22–39)
 4. "I Am" statements
 - a. related to the divine name (YHWH)
 - 1) I am He (4:26; 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5–6)
 - 2) before Abraham was I am (8:54–59)
 - b. with predicate nominatives
 - 1) I am the bread of life (6:35, 41, 48, 51)
 - 2) I am the light of the world (8:12)
 - 3) I am the door of the sheepfold (10:7, 9)
 - 4) I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14)

- 5) I am the resurrection and the life (11:25)
- 6) I am the way, the truth and the life (14:6)
- 7) I am the true vine (15:1, 5)

E. The differences between John and the other Gospels

1. Although it is true that John's primary purpose is theological, his use of history and geography is extremely accurate and detailed. The exact reason for the discrepancies between the Synoptics and John is uncertain
 - a. an early Judean ministry (early cleansing of the Temple)
 - b. chronology and date of the last week of Jesus' life
2. It would be helpful to take a moment to discuss the obvious difference between John and the Synoptics. Let me quote George Eldon Ladd from *A Theology of the New Testament* on the differences:
 - a. "The Fourth Gospel is so different from the Synoptics that the question must be honestly faced whether it reports accurately the teachings of Jesus or whether Christian faith has so modified the tradition that history is swallowed up in theological interpretation" (p. 215).
 - b. "The solution that lies closest to hand is that the teachings of Jesus are expressed in Johannine idiom. If this is the correct solution, and if we must conclude that the Fourth Gospel is couched in Johannine idiom, this important question follows: To what extent is the theology of the Fourth Gospel that of John rather than that of Jesus? To what extent has the teaching of Jesus been so assimilated in John's mind that what we have is a Johannine interpretation rather than an accurate representation of Jesus' own teaching?" (p. 215).
 - c. Ladd also quotes W. F. Albright from "Recent Discoveries in Palestine and the Gospel of John" in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology* edited by W. D. Davies and D. Daube

"There is no fundamental difference in teaching between John and the Synoptics; the contrast between them lies in the concentration of tradition along certain aspects of Christ's teachings, particularly those which seem to have resembled the teaching of the Essenes most closely.

There is absolutely nothing to show that any of Jesus' teachings have been distorted or falsified, or that a vital new element has been added to them. That the needs of the early Church influenced the selection of items for inclusion in the Gospel we may readily admit, but there is no reason to suppose that the needs of that Church were responsible for any inventions or innovations of theological significance.

One of the strangest assumptions of critical New Testament scholars and theologians is that the mind of Jesus was so limited that any apparent contrast between John and the Synoptics must be due to differences between early Christian theologians. Every great thinker and personality is going to be interpreted differently by different friends and hearers, who will select what seems most congenial or useful out of what they have seen and heard" (pp. 170–171).

- d. And again from George E. Ladd:
“The difference between them is not that John is theological and the others are not but that all are theological in different ways. Interpreted history may represent more truly the facts of a situation than a mere chronicle of events. If John is a theological interpretation, it is an interpretation of events that John is convinced happened in history. It is obviously not the intent of the Synoptic Gospels to give a report of the *ipsissima verba* of (the exact words) Jesus nor a biography of the events of his life. They are portraits of Jesus and summaries of his teaching. Matthew and Luke feel themselves free to rearrange the material in Mark and to report Jesus’ teaching with considerable freedom. If John used more freedom than Matthew and Luke, it is because he wished to give a more profound and ultimately more real portrait of Jesus” (pp. 221–222).

AUTHOR

- A. The Gospel is anonymous but hints at John’s authorship
1. an eye witness author (cf. 19:35)
 2. the phrase “the beloved disciple” (both Polycrates and Irenaeus identify him as John the Apostle)
 3. John, son of Zebedee, never mentioned by name
- B. The historical setting is obvious from the Gospel itself, therefore, the issue of authorship is not a crucial factor in interpretation. The affirmation of an inspired author is crucial!
The authorship and date of John’s Gospel does not affect inspiration, but interpretation. Commentators seek a historical setting, an occasion that caused the book to be written. Should one compare John’s dualism to (1) the Jewish two ages; (2) the Qumran teacher of righteousness; (3) Zoroastrian religion; (4) Gnostic thought; or (5) the unique perspective of Jesus?
- C. The early traditional view is that John the Apostle, son of Zebedee, is the human, eye-witness source. This must be clarified because second century external sources seem to link others in the production of the Gospel:
1. Fellow believers and the Ephesian elders encouraged the aging Apostle to write (Eusebius quotes Clement of Alexandria)
 2. A fellow Apostle, Andrew (the Muratorian Fragment, A.D. 180–200, from Rome)
- D. Some modern scholars have assumed another author based on several assumptions about the style and subject matter of the Gospel. Many assume an early second century date (before A.D. 115):
1. written by John’s disciples (a Johannine circle of influence) who remembered his teachings (J. Weiss, B. Lightfoot, C. H. Dodd, O. Cullmann, R. A. Culpepper, C. K. Barrett)
 2. written by “the elder John,” (one of a series of early leaders from Asia influenced by John the Apostle’s theology and terminology) which is derived from an obscure passage in Papias (A.D. 70–146) quoted by Eusebius (A.D. 280–339)

- E. Evidence for John himself as the primary source for the material of the Gospel
1. internal evidence
 - a. the author knew Jewish teachings and rituals and shared their OT world view
 - b. the author knew Palestine and Jerusalem in their pre-A.D. 70 condition
 - c. the author claims to be an eyewitness
 - 1) 1:14
 - 2) 19:35
 - 3) 21:24
 - d. the author was a member of the apostolic group, for he is familiar with
 - 1) details of time and place (the night trials)
 - 2) details of numbers (water pots of 2:6 and fish of 21:11)
 - 3) details of persons
 - 4) the author knew details of events and the reaction to them
 - 5) the author seems to be designated as “the beloved disciple”
 - a) 13:23, 25
 - b) 19:26–27, 34–35
 - c) 20:2–5, 8
 - d) 21:7, 20–24
 - 6) the author seems to be a member of the inner circle along with Peter
 - a) 13:24
 - b) 20:2
 - c) 21:7
 - 7) the name John, son of Zebedee, never appears in this Gospel, which seems highly unusual because he was a member of the Apostolic inner circle
 - e. External evidence
 - 1) Gospel known by
 - a) Irenaeus (A.D. 120–202) who was associated with Polycarp, knew John the Apostle (cf. Eusebius’ *Historical Eccleasticus* 5:20:6–7) - “John the disciple of the Lord who reclined on His breast and himself issued the Gospel at Ephesus in Asia” (*Haer*, 3:1:1, quoted in Eusebius’ *Hist. Eccl.* 5:8:4).
 - b) Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 153–217) - “John who was urged by his friends and divinely moved by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel” (Eusebius’ *Historical Eccleasticus* 6:14:7)
 - c) Justin Martyr (A.D. 110–165) in his *Dialogue with Trypho* 81:4
 - d) Tertullian (A.D. 145–220)
 - 2) John’s authorship asserted by very early witnesses
 - a) Polycarp (A.D. 70–156, recorded by Irenaeus), who was bishop of Smyrna (A.D. 155)
 - b) Papias (A.D. 70–146, recorded by the Anti-Marconite Prologue from Rome and Eusebius), who was the bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia and reported to be a disciple of John the Apostle
- F. Reasons used to doubt traditional authorship
1. The Gospel’s connection with gnostic themes

2. The obvious appendix of chapter 21
 3. The chronological discrepancies with the Synoptics
 4. John would not have referred to himself as “the beloved disciple”
 5. John’s Jesus uses different vocabulary and genres than the Synoptics
- G. If we assume it was John the Apostle then what can we assume about the man?
1. He wrote from Ephesus (Irenaeus says “issued the Gospel from Ephesus”)
 2. He wrote when he was an older man (Irenaeus says he lived until the reign of Trajan, A.D. 98–117)

DATE

- A. If we assume John the Apostle
1. before A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman General (later Emperor), Titus
 - a. in John 5:2, “Now in Jerusalem near the shep gate *there is* a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, which has five porticoes ...”
 - b. repeated use of the early title “disciples” to denote the apostolic group
 - c. supposed later gnostic elements have now been discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which show they were part of the theological jargon of the first century
 - d. no mention of the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70
 - e. the famous American archaeologist W. F. Albright asserts a date for the Gospel in the late 70’s or early 80’s
 2. later in the first century
 - a. the developed theology of John
 - b. the fall of Jerusalem not mentioned because it occurred some twenty years earlier
 - c. John’s use of gnostic-type phrasing and emphasis
 - d. the early traditions of the church
 - 1) Irenaeus
 - 2) Eusebius
- B. If we assume “John the elder” then the date would be early to mid second century. This theory started with Dionysius’ rejection of John the Apostle’s authorship (for literary reasons). Eusebius, who rejected John the Apostle’s authorship of Revelation for theological reasons, felt he had found another “John” at the right time and in the right place in Papias’ quote (*Historical Ecclesiasticus* 3:39:5, 6), which lists two “Johns” (1) the Apostle and (2) an Elder (presbyter).

RECIPIENTS

- A. Originally it was written to the churches of the Roman Province of Asia Minor, particularly Ephesus.

- B. Because of the profound simplicity and depth of this account of the life and person of Jesus of Nazareth this became a favorite Gospel for both Hellenistic Gentile believers and gnostic groups.

PURPOSES

- A. The Gospel itself asserts its evangelistic purpose, 20:30–31
 - 1. for Jewish readers
 - 2. for Gentile readers
 - 3. for incipient gnostic readers
- B. It seems to have an apologetic thrust
 - 1. against the fanatic followers of John the Baptist
 - 2. against the incipient gnostic false teachers (especially the Prologue); these groups can be seen in the NT books of
 - a. Ephesians
 - b. Colossians
 - c. the Pastoral Epistles (I Timothy, Titus, II Timothy)
 - d. I John (I John may have functioned as a cover letter for the Gospel)
- C. There is the possibility that the purpose statement of 20:31 may be understood as encouraging the doctrine of perseverance as well as evangelism because of the consistent use of the PRESENT TENSE to describe salvation. In this sense John, like James, may be balancing an over-emphasis of Paul's theology by some groups in Asia Minor (cf. 2 Peter 3:15–16). It is surprising that early church tradition identifies John with Ephesus, not Paul (cf. F. F. Bruce's *Peter, Stephen, James and John: Studies in Non-Pauline Christianity*, pp. 120–121).
- D. The Epilogue (chapter 21) seems to answer specific questions of the early church
 - 1. John supplements the accounts of the Synoptic Gospels. However, he focuses on the Judean ministry, particularly Jerusalem.
 - 2. The two questions covered in the Appendix, chapter 21
 - a. Peter's restoration
 - b. John's longevity
 - c. Jesus' delayed return
- E. Some see John as de-emphasizing sacramentalism by purposefully ignoring and not recording or discussing the ordinances themselves despite perfect contextual opportunities in chapter 3 (for baptism) and chapter 6 (for the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper).¹

¹ Uteley, R. J. (1999). *The Beloved Disciple's Memoirs and Letters: The Gospel of John, I, II, and III John: Vol. Volume 4* (pp. 1–4). Bible Lessons International.

The Thesis of the Gospel of John

John 20:30-31

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but 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.

- I. Not everything Jesus did was recorded. John was saying, “I got a plethora of examples for you, but I’m sharing the ones I’m sharing for a purpose.”
- II. The purpose of what was recorded in John was to provide what was necessary for its recipients to come to the belief ‘that Jesus is the Christ.’
- III. That by believing in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, you may have life in His name.

CONCLUSION:

“Christianity does not look on this world as one which God very occasionally invades; it looks on it as a world from which he is never absent.”

— William Barclay, The Gospel of John, Volume One