

A Survey of the Gospel of John

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Author:

The gospel of John does not designate authorship. It was written much later than the synoptic gospels, but it has been subjected to more skepticism as to its authorship than the others. However, it is traditionally accepted to be the work of the apostle John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James. Those who reject John's authorship argue that he was a simple Galilean fisherman who was unschooled and ordinary (**Acts 4:13**). They contend that it could have been another man named John or just attributed to the apostle John.

The internal evidence supports John's authorship. **John 21:20, 24** declares that this gospel is from the pen of "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (**John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 20**). Who is this beloved disciple? The data from the book itself points to five conclusions: (1) The writer must be a Jew, (2) The writer is a first-century Palestinian Jew, (3) The writer is an eyewitness of Christ, (4) The writer is an apostle, (5) The writer is one of Jesus' closest associates.

The three closest to Jesus during his ministry, Peter, James, and John, have to be considered (**Mark 5:37, 9:2, 14:33**). Peter is ruled out because he is customarily named in the gospel. James is eliminated because he was martyred before the death of Herod Agrippa I in 44 AD (**Acts 12:2**). Leaving only John, the beloved, who is not mentioned by name in the book, giving further evidence of his probable authorship of this anonymous gospel. The early church testimony of Ignatius (115), Polycarp, Justin Martyr (150), Titian (170) Irenaeus and Tertullian also stand strongly united in affirming John as the author.

The purpose of the author's writing is clearly identified in two verses. **John 20:30-31** says, "*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*" It makes sense that an apostle, like John who was an eye-witness to the life and ministry of Christ, would want to preserve these stories.

Date:

As with the authorship of this gospel, there is also controversy over when exactly this book was written. There have been many suggestions. For many years some held to a later dating of this gospel, but with the evidence regarding authorship (above) it is clear that it was written before 100 AD. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls provided the much needed proof that John was written in the late first century. In fact, the oldest existing portion of the New Testament is a fragment of **John 18:31-33, 37-38**.

Since a much later date can be rejected because of recent manuscript discoveries, church tradition can be upheld. Traditionally, two schools of thought presents an early date, just prior to 70 AD, and a possibly later date between 80-95 AD. There is no compelling evidence one way or another, but the later date is the consensus of many conservative scholars.

Theme:

The theme of his gospel seems to be that Jesus is the Word of God. He is not only the Son of God, but the mouthpiece of God, the Lamb of God, and the Light of the world. For this reason, the Gospel of John is a favorite reading among Christians. He uses key words like signs, believe, and life. Specifically, there are seven signs/miracles, seven “I Am” statements, seven witnesses, and seven sermons. John uses all of this material develop an argument for the deity of Jesus. The only strange exclusion is that there are no examples of casting out demons.

This gospel is uniquely different from the synoptics in that 90% of its content is not discussed by the other gospels, even though the writer could have had these gospel accounts at his disposal when he wrote. The author carefully chose, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, only those events, miracles, and sermons that would supplement his literary intent. The result of his effort is a Maverick gospel which is hailed “the most amazing book that was ever written.”

Audience:

It seems that the gospel may have been written not to supplement the other gospels, but to give deeper personal significance to their testimony. He writes as an eyewitness, hoping that those who knew him (John) would see why He chose to serve Christ. This makes sense when one notes that the place of the writing is believed to have been Ephesus. Irenaeus and Eusebius held to this, although others have suggested Alexandria, Antioch, or Jerusalem. There is a patristic nature to the book. John served as an elder of the Ephesian church (see notes on Ephesians, I John, II John, III John) and would have written it for his congregation.

In order to reach a more Jewish audience, John wrote the book using the Hebrew Bible instead of the Greek Bible. He quotes from the Old Testament (**John 12:40, 13:18, 19:37**) and gives thorough explanations of Jewish feasts and customs including wedding feasts (**John 2:1-12**), ceremonial purification (**John 3:25**), various religious feasts (**John 2:13, 23, 6:4, 13:1, 18:28**), and burial customs (**John 11:38, 44, 19:40**). Throughout the gospel he gives detailed geographical descriptions about Palestine including the exact distance between Bethany and Jerusalem (**John 11:18**), the depth of Jacob’s well (**John 4:11**), and the location of Ephraim which was near the wilderness (**John 11:54**). All of this help to reach receptive Jews.

Key Verses:

John 1:1-5, 1:14, 1:29, 3:16, 4:24, 6:29, 7:28-29, 8:24, 10:10, 10:28, 11:25-26, 13:23, 13:34-35, 14:1-3, 14:6, 14:9, 15:1-8, 17:17, 18:5-8, 19:26, 19:30, 20:2, 20:29-31, 21:7, 21:20-23, 21:24-25

Outline:

- I. *Incarnation of the Son of God (1:1-18)*
- II. *Presentation of the Son of God (1:19-4:54)*
- III. *Confrontations with the Son of God (5:1-12:50)*
- IV. *Instructions by the Son of God (13:1-16:33)*
- V. *Intercession of the Son of God (17:1-26)*
- VI. *Crucifixion of the Son of God (18:1-19:42)*
- VII. *Resurrection of the Son of God (20:1-21:25)*