

The Gospel of John: The ABCs

Authorship, Background, and Contents

Authorship

Though the names traditionally assigned to the four gospels go back to earliest Christian times — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — it is true that none of the four actually names its author. We have accepted the identities of the authors on other grounds, chiefly consistent early tradition along with internal evidence. Probably the last gospel written, the authorship of John can be established with confidence.

In one of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, the decisive clue leading the detective to the solution of the mystery is “the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime.” When a puzzled character says, “But the dog did nothing in the nighttime,” Holmes replies, “That is the curious incident.” The dog did not bark because he knew the person who came to the stable, guiding Holmes to the culprit. The mystery hinges on what did *not* happen.

Similarly, the Fourth Gospel is striking because of the central character who is never named — the apostle John. This John was the brother of James and the son of Zebedee, nicknamed with his brother “the Sons of Thunder.” These brothers along with Peter figure prominently in the other three gospels as Jesus’ inner circle. In this gospel Peter appears often, as do many lesser-known disciples, such as Nathaniel, Philip, and Thomas. It is therefore surprising that John, who is mentioned so often in all of the other gospels, is never named in this one.

There is a person referred to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” and this person is identified as the author in 21:20-24. James was martyred too early to have written this gospel (about A.D. 44), so that leaves John. Many scholars have pointed out that the author of this gospel was a Jew who lived in Palestine before the destruction of Jerusalem. He is accurate on many details that someone would not know otherwise, such as geography, culture, religious practices, and architecture — much of which did not exist after A.D. 70. Some of the architectural features he mentions were not verified until they were discovered by archaeologists in the 20th century. John’s descriptions are true.

All early Christian writers identify John as the author. Irenaeus, writing about A.D. 180 wrote that

John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon his breast, had himself published a gospel during his residence in Ephesus in Asia.

Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John himself in his youth, giving a strong link back to the first generation of Christians. Irenaeus writes:

I remember the events of those days more clearly than those which have happened recently ... I can speak even of the place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and disputed ... how he reported his converse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words, and what were the things concerning the Lord which he had heard from them, including his miracles and his teaching, and how Polycarp had

received them from the eyewitnesses of the word of life, and reported all things in agreement with the Scriptures.

The early Christian historian Eusebius, writing about A.D. 325, says that the first three gospels having already been written (Matthew, Mark, and Luke, known as the “Synoptic” gospels), they were presented to John for his comments:

He admitted them, giving his testimony to their truth; but that there was only wanting in the narrative the account of the things done by Christ among the first of his deeds, and at the commencement of the gospel... For these reasons the apostle John, it is said, being entreated to undertake it, wrote the account of the time not recorded by the former evangelists.

John reflects this, seeming deliberately to avoid retelling many of the teachings and events already presented in the Synoptics, and filling in many of the blanks they do not cover (see Contents).

Two important archaeological discoveries also have confirmed the traditional date of John. One of these, the John Rylands papyrus, is the oldest extant portion of New Testament Scripture: a fragment of the Gospel of John dated about A.D. 130. This proves that, allowing time for copying and transmission, this gospel could have been written no later than the time always assigned to it — between A.D. 70-90, most likely 80-85.

Background

As seen in the Irenaeus quote above, John appears to consciously supplement the three gospels that had already been written. Early traditions are consistent in placing John in and around Ephesus during the last decades of his life.

The first three gospels in the New Testament are known as the “Synoptic” gospels, meaning “seen together” or giving a “common view.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a common outline, probably because Matthew and Luke used Mark as the structure upon which they built additional records about Jesus’ life and teachings. John stands apart as a strikingly different viewpoint of Christ, emphasizing different teachings and events than the others.

In the first decades after Christ’s resurrection, the Church was primarily Jewish. Jewish Christians coexisted within the community of the Jews, and there was alternately uneasy tolerance and rejection (the Epistle of James was probably written during this period). But after the destruction of Jerusalem, relations between Christians and non-Christian Jews widened, and there was much animosity. The Jewish Christians among them would have been special targets of scorn. John’s writings — the Gospel, his three letters, and especially the Revelation — reflect that hostility, and give encouragement to keep believing.

We can know, however, that his listeners were primarily Gentiles. As such, they would have had a weaker foundation of Old Testament understanding. They would have been quite familiar with the religious currents of the day, and more susceptible to the errors of the cultures from which they came. The religious atmosphere of the time was a swirling mix of pagan

mythologies, philosophical speculations, and mystery cults. Believers needed clear truth to keep their focus on Christ and the gospel.

Many early traditions say that John contended with a false teacher named Cerinthus, who taught an early version of Gnosticism. In brief, Gnosticism was a religious and philosophical movement based on the understanding that the material universe is an illusion and evil. Only “spirit” is good. Therefore, pure “spirit” could not be united with matter. The word Gnostic comes from the Greek *gnosis*, knowledge. “Salvation” for a Gnostic meant coming to this “spiritual knowledge” and escaping the illusion of this world.

Cerinthus taught that Jesus, being pure Spirit, could not have joined himself to matter. He only *seemed* to have a human body. From this view, the error of Cerinthus has been called “Docetism” — from the Greek word *dokeo*, “to seem.” The First Letter of John directly attacks this false teaching.

Whether or not this controversy had arisen by the time this gospel was written, John could hardly have chosen language better designed to attack Docetism than these words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh.

John 1:1,14

Jesus was not *partly* God. He was not God *pretending* to be a man. He was not God who only *seemed* to be a man. Jesus Christ was truly God-become-Man.

The profound claims of Christ and the profound teaching of the apostle John have given us incredibly strong assurance of who Jesus was and is.

Contents

A major contribution of John is his narrative of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, a period passed over by the other gospel writers. For example, Mark summarizes in a single chapter the inaugural preaching of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, and the temptations. Then he goes straight to this comment:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. (Mark 1:14)

Matthew and Luke follow this pattern, giving the impression that Jesus’ move to Galilee was immediate. It is John who explains more fully, telling us that Jesus spent somewhere between 6-12 months working in Judea under the umbrella of the Baptist’s ministry. The first four chapters of John describe Jesus’ activities during this period. From the viewpoint of the public at the time, John the Baptist was seen as the leader of the movement, with Jesus subordinate. But Jesus quickly took over the dominant role. That’s why we have this exchange:

They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

To this John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ . . . He must become greater; I must become less. (John 3:26-30)

During this period the disciple John became acquainted with Jesus and began to follow him. John also tells of how Peter met Jesus in 1:40-42. Thus we know that when Jesus calls Peter and Andrew to full-time discipleship in Matthew 4:18-20 (“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”) it is not the first time they had ever met him. Peter and Andrew had known Jesus for several months, as John makes clear. The same was true for John and his brother James.

I. The Theme of John: Eternal life comes through faith in Jesus Christ

According to Stephen S. Kim, “The literary structure of the Fourth Gospel makes it one of the most carefully crafted pieces of literature in the Bible.” But what was it crafted to accomplish? Merrill C. Tenney has written, “One of the peculiarities of the Fourth Gospel is the fact that its author chose to hang its key by the back door.”

He is speaking of John 20:30-31, where the apostle reveals his purpose:

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Just as in his letters, John wanted believers to have a clear understanding of who Christ is and what He has accomplished, and thus have assurance of salvation through faith in Him. John identified his aim in his first letter, which could also serve as the purpose statement of his gospel:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

Scholar N. T. Wright points out that the Greek “verb ‘believe’ (*pisteuein*) occurs more in this gospel than in Matthew, Mark and Luke put together; and, perhaps even more surprising, more than in all of Paul’s letters put together.” It is used 99 times in John’s gospel.

II. Knowing Whom to Believe: Emphasizing the claims of Christ.

Biblical faith requires *content*; that is, it is not a feeling, nor is it “putting your brain on the shelf.” Exercising faith according to the Scriptures means you know the person who is the object of your faith.

John establishes the identity of Jesus immediately:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)

In this profound opening, John refers to Christ as “the Word” — Greek, *Logos*. *Logos* means not only “word” but “communication,” “speech,” “reason,” and “logic.” Thinking of the Word as Creator, it is striking to recall the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1, where God creates all things merely by *speaking*.

Notice that not only was the Word “with God” in the beginning, but also that “the Word *was* God.” How can a Person both be “with” God and “be” God at the same time? It boggles the imagination, but from passages like this we see a glimpse of the eternal three-fold nature of God, who is a Trinity: three Persons in one Divine Nature. Then in verse 2 it is made clear that the Word is not some impersonal quality of God, but a Person: “**He** was with God in the beginning.”

This same Word “became flesh” (v. 14) — a real human being in whom we see the glory of the invisible God. Therefore, as Jesus says later,

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9)

Jesus’ direct claims to deity can be seen throughout this gospel. Some examples:

- ***Jesus’ claim of the Divine Name.*** In the midst of a hot controversy with his opponents (chapter 8), Jesus did not shy away from the confrontation. On the contrary, he inflamed it. He tells them that because of their unbelief, “You will die in your sins” (v. 23); “You belong to your father, the devil” (v. 44); and “You do not belong to God” (v. 47). Finally he pushes them over the edge by claiming, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (v. 56). They protest that it’s impossible; Abraham lived 2000 years before!

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I AM!” (v. 58)

At this point they picked up stones to stone Jesus. Why? Because they heard loud and clear that Jesus was claiming to be God — “I AM” is the name by which God introduced himself to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3).

- ***Jesus’ claim to be One with the Father.*** In the midst of another controversy Jesus made a claim no one could miss. We are told that his opponents demanded answers: The Jews gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly” (10:24). Jesus goes on to say,

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one. (10:27-30)

At this statement, they again picked up stones. When Jesus asks them why, they reply that it is not for any good work, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

- **The “Seven Great ‘I am’s’.**” In the progress of his ministry, the Lord made seven striking claims, all beginning with “I am.” Despite the common view in our culture that Jesus was an ordinary man, imagine “an ordinary man” saying things like these:

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. (6:35)

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (8:12)

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. (10:9)

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (10:11)

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. (11:25-26)

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (14:6)

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (15:5)

Put these claims together, and you’ll see that Jesus is claiming to be the answer to every one of the deepest needs of the human heart. No mere man could fulfill them.

Conclusion

In this introduction we can only briefly mention a few of the other important themes in John. **The ministry of the Holy Spirit** is spelled out in great detail by the Lord in chapters 14-16. The narratives of **Jesus’ encounters with individuals**, such as the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, are profound and fascinating. You’ll also find strong emphasis on the **humanity** of Christ, where he declares his dependency upon the Father for all he said and did:

I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. . . . By myself I can do nothing. (5:19, 30)

Finally, the Lord calls his people to live in the same way he did:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (15:5)

Just as Jesus in his humanity could “do nothing” apart from the Father, he tells us that apart from him *we* can do nothing. Only through the indwelling Holy Spirit (Christ himself in us) are we able to live the genuine Christian life. Our manner of living is the same as his: Total dependency upon the Lord who supplies the ability to do his will. He *produces* the fruit; *we bear* fruit through relying on him.

The Gospel of John is a lifetime study, and at the end of it you’ll feel your studies are only beginning!