

Introduction to the Gospel according to John

Where is it in the Bible?

John is the fourth book in the New Testament and the last of the four Gospels. It is found between Luke and Acts.

Who wrote it?

According to John 21:20-24, this Gospel was based on the testimony of “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” This person is not identified, and, other than that vague description, the book itself does not say anything about its author. From the late second century, the belief in the Church was that this gospel had been written by John, the son of Zebedee. This has been questioned for many years and numerous proposals have been made regarding the identity of the “beloved disciple”; for example, Martin Luther thought it might have been Lazarus. Most scholars feel that the gospel was written by one of Jesus’ disciples, who might have been John. But in spite of the difficulties and questions, the traditional and most popular opinion is that the author was John.

When was it written?

Many scholars feel that the gospel that we have today is an edited version of the original. This makes it very difficult to date its composition. Most feel that it was completed during 90’s, not long after Matthew and Luke were written.

What is it about?

The Gospel itself says that it was written so that those who read or heard it “might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.” The prologue shows the place that the story of Jesus occupies in the wider history of salvation. The author wanted to show that Jesus was really from God and refute claims to the contrary.

How is it structured?

- I. Prologue (1:1-18)
- II. The Beginning of Jesus’ Ministry (1:19-51)
 - a. John the Baptizer (1:19-34)
 - b. Call of the First Disciples (1:35-51)
- III. Jesus’ Public Ministry (Book of Signs) (2:1-11:57)
 - a. The Wedding at Cana (2:1-11)
 - b. Cleansing the Temple (2:12-22)
 - c. Nicodemus (3:1-21)
 - d. John the Baptizer and Jesus (3:22-36)
 - e. The Samaritan Woman (4:1-42)
 - f. Healing the Official’s Son (4:43-54)
 - g. Healing the Lame Man at Bethesda (5:1-47)
 - h. Feeding the Five Thousand (6:1-15)
 - i. Walking on the Water (6:16-21)
 - j. The Bread of Life Discourse (6:22-71)
 - k. Jesus at the Festival of Booths (7:1-52)
 - l. The Woman Caught in Adultery (7:53-8:11)

- m. The Light of the World (8:12-59)
- n. Healing the Man born Blind (9:1-41)
- o. The Good Shepherd Discourse (10:1-42)
- p. The Raising of Lazarus (11:1-57)
- IV. The Passion Narrative (Book of Glory) (12:1-19:42)
 - a. Mary Anoints Jesus' Feet (12:1-8)
 - b. Triumphal Entry and Other Events (12:9-50)
 - c. The Upper Room (13:1-17:26)
 - d. Jesus' Arrest, Trial, and Crucifixion (18:1-19:42)
- V. The Resurrection Narrative (20:1-21:25)

What are some things to look for?

- **Differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels:** More than 90% of the material in John does not appear in the other three Gospels. John contains many stories that are not found elsewhere, and some of them are very long: Jesus and Nicodemus, the healing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. On the other hand, there are no stories about Jesus' temptation or transfiguration, no parables, and no exorcisms in John. The mighty deeds which Jesus does are called "signs", not "miracles", because they point to the presence and power of God. Many of the details surrounding the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus are unique.
- **Jesus Humanity and Divinity:** John is the only Gospel to explicitly identify Jesus as God (1:1), and Jesus himself says that he is one with the Father (10:30). Jesus' "I am" statements bring to mind the name of God given in Exodus 3:14. However, it is also clear that Jesus is a human being. He feels grief, gets tired, weeps, and is thirsty.
- **The Jews:** This Gospel often refers to the opponents of Jesus as "the Jews". Mark Allan Powell explains:

Scholars are quick to point out that the antipathy John's Gospel shows toward 'the Jews' was never intended to convey a generic condemnation of an entire race or nation (all Jewish people everywhere); what John's Gospel offers is a more specific attack on a particular expression of a rival religious movement (first-century Jewish synagogue religion). Nevertheless, polemical passages in John's Gospel have often been used to support anti-Semitism. Some Bible translators now render the word *Ioudaioi* in John's gospel by some term other than 'Jews' (e.g., "Judeans") to indicate that it refers to a specific group of people who lived at a particular place and time."¹
- **The Lord's Supper:** John's account of Jesus' last Passover meal focuses on him washing his disciples' feet and does not include anything about the institution of the Lord's Supper. John 6 is often seen as including the author's Eucharistic theology.
- **Love:** John's Gospel speaks more about love than the other three Gospels combined. God sent Jesus into the world because of love (3:16). Ultimately, Jesus shows his love for mankind by laying down his life. The love that believers have for one another is the foremost mark of discipleship (13:34).

¹ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 187.