

# The Gospel of John

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*Introduction and John 1:1-1:18*

## Purpose of the Book

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The Gospel of John states its own purpose in John 20:30-31:

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

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The Author states that his aim in writing is to encourage belief in Jesus as the Messiah (or Christ), the Son of God. The intent is not merely to inform but to convert unto eternal life.

## Author

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The Gospel writer does not specifically name himself, however he does identify himself as one of the twelve present at the last supper:

*Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"*

*This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. –John 21:20-24*

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Six times, throughout the Gospel, the author calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved", or the Beloved Disciple. It is the Beloved Disciple who reclines at the table next to Jesus at the Last Supper, and asks Jesus to reveal the identity of his betrayer. (13:23-25) At the foot of the cross, Jesus tells his mother, "Woman, here is your son", and to the Beloved Disciple he says, "Here is your mother." (19:26-27) When Mary Magdalene is confronted with the empty tomb, she immediately runs to tell the Beloved Disciple and Peter.

The two men rush to the empty tomb and the Beloved Disciple arrives first but defers to Peter to enter first. (20:1-10) In the last chapter of the Gospel of John, the Beloved Disciple is one of seven fishermen

involved in the miraculous catch of 153 fish. (21:1-25) Also in the book's final chapter, Simon Peter is reprimanded after he inquires about the fate of the Beloved Disciple. (21:20-23) In the Gospel's last chapter, the author shares that the Book is the testimony of the disciple whom Jesus loved. (21:24) Add to this that in the entirety of the Gospel, John the Son of Zebedee is never named by name and the reader is left to consider John as the author.

### The Tradition

In the first centuries of the Christian Church, authorship of the fourth gospel was always attributed to Jesus' disciple, John, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee. The first to testify to John as the author is Bishop Irenaeus:

*Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who had even rested on his breast, himself also gave forth the gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.*<sup>28</sup>

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According to the early church historian Eusebius (325), Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp who was a disciple of the Apostle John. This makes this early reference a very reliable personal testimony. During the first centuries of the early church, the attribution of John as author was never questioned. There were groups that opposed the content of the Gospel, such as the followers of the Gnostic heresies of Marcion. However, they never called into question the authorship of the Gospel.

### John the Beloved Disciple

Because John was one of the "inner three" of Jesus 12 disciples (cf. Matt. 17:1), we know a great deal about him. John and his brother are known as "the sons of Zebedee." They were in the fishing business. Along with Simon Peter, they were initially called by Jesus from the shore of the Sea of Galilee to become "fishers of men".

It is possible that John was actually a cousin of Jesus, one commentator writes:

*A comparison of Mark 15:40 and Matthew 27:56 indicates that their mother's name was Salome and that she also followed Jesus at least some of the time. At one time she asked Jesus to give her sons preferential treatment in his kingdom, according to Matthew 20:21. Going a step further, a comparison of John 19:25 and Matthew 27:56 may indicate that Salome, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, was actually the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. This would have made John the cousin of Jesus. If this was true it helps explain why Jesus speaking from the cross in John 19:25-27 asked John to take care of his mother.*<sup>29</sup>

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James and John were called "Sons of Thunder." (Mark 3:17) The two young brothers had a zealous militant streak. In the Gospel of Luke we read about how they wanted to "call down fire" on a Samaritan

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<sup>28</sup> Around A.D. 325 the church historian Eusebius provided this quote from Irenaeus in his work *Ecclesiastical History*, book 5, chapter 11, section 4

<sup>29</sup> *The Gospels: The Gospel according to John* (Third Millennium Ministries, 2012) p. 5.

village for rejecting Jesus (Luke 9:54-56) It is this strong emotion that Jesus transfigures in the person of John. He becomes zealous for love.

As a member of the inner three, Peter, James and John were with Jesus every step of the way of the Cross. They were present on the Mount of transfiguration; they were with Jesus when he sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. They received special attention and teaching from Jesus. For this reason, these three are considered the primary leaders and pillars in the early church. (see Gal. 2:9)

The tradition holds that John has a length ministry in Ephesus, Irenaeus provided reports of his ministry in Ephesus through his disciple Polycarp:

*“John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, “Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within.”<sup>30</sup>*

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From the Book of Revelation, we know of John’s exile to Patmos for holding fast to the word of truth in Jesus Name. (Revelation 1:9) Tradition holds that John died of old age.

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## Original Audience

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As the quote from Irenaeus above indicates, the origination and original audience of the Gospel of John was the region of Asia Minor. As with Luke’s and Mark’s gospel, John does give some explanations to his readers that indicate that they were at the very least non-Palestinian.

His audience was likely made up of both Jewish and Gentile readers. He is careful to contrast Jews vs. Israelites. John uses the term Jews more than any other Gospel, 70 times compared to 20 for the other three Gospels combined. Whenever he uses the term it is almost always a negative connotation.

*“they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus[a] to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.” --John 9:22*

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However, he is careful to identify Jewish believers as “Israel” and “Israelites”.

*Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit! –John 1:46*

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John’s Gospel is likely written well after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. He places prophecies of that destruction at the beginning of the Gospel and they are not emphasized as they are in the Synoptic

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<sup>30</sup> Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III.3.4

Gospels. He was likely writing around 85-90 AD during a time where Jewish believers were being intensely persecuted out of the synagogues and all Christians, Jew and Gentile alike were suffering under the oppression of the Romans.

## Structure

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The structure of the Gospel is as follows:

- **Prologue: The Word made Flesh (1:1-18)**
- **The Book of Signs: The Signs of the Messiah (1:19-12:50)**
- **The Book of Glory: Jesus Preparation of the messianic Community and his Passion (13:1-20:31)**
- **Epilogue: Witnesses to Glory: Resurrection and Witness (21:1-25)**

### The Prologue: The Word Made Flesh (1:1-18)

In many ways, John Chapter one serves to introduce all of the major themes of the entire Gospel. Some commentators see a chiasmic structure to the Prologue<sup>31</sup>:

- A) 1-2: The Divine WORD was with God eternally.
- B) 3: All things came into being through it/him (the Word).
- C) 4-5: In him was life and light, which darkness did not overcome.
- D) 6-8: [*John was not the light, but came to testify about the light.*]
- E) 9-10: The True Light was in the world, but the world did not recognize him.
- F) 11: He came into his own realm, but his own people did not accept him.
- G) 12: THOSE WHO DO BELIEVE IN HIM BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD.**
- F') 13: These believers are not ordinary human offspring, but are born of God.
- E') 14: The Incarnate WORD reveals God's glory, full of grace and truth.
- D') 15: [*John testified about the priority of the one coming after him.*]
- C') 16: Out of his (the Word's) fullness, we all received grace upon grace.
- B') 17: Grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ.
- A') 18: The only-begotten Son has revealed God.

The hinge of the chiasm above highlights the main purpose of the Gospel. John's aim in writing his Gospel is to encourage the belief that leads to adoption as children of God. Indeed this is exactly the theme summarized by John in the thesis statement in the Epilogue (cf. John 20:30-31). The general structure of the Gospel follows several of the main themes.

First, Jesus is the revelation of God's life and glory. Glory is the visible manifestation of the true nature of God in all of his attributes. Throughout the Gospel, John will describe signs of Jesus glory. There will

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<sup>31</sup> <http://catholic-resources.org/John/Outline-John01.html>

be 7 “I am” statements that connect the Divine Name “YHWH” (“I am”) to Jesus self-disclosure as the Word made flesh. The number 7 plays prominently in the Gospel as a symbol of New Creation and New Covenant in Jesus.

The rejection of the Messiah by “his own” will form the major plot line of Jesus interaction with the “Jews” throughout the Gospel culminating in his trial and crucifixion. The theme of belief and receiving will also form a major plot line and call to action. What does it mean to believe?

A major theme is the idea of bearing witness or testimony. The role of John the Baptist is highlighted in the prologue. This too will form a major theme as it is the testimony of Jesus and about Jesus that is being called into question by the Jews and Romans and this is the fundamental call to action for the disciple of Jesus Christ.

*For now, John wants to encourage us to marvel in the revelation of the divine, Son of God. What will it take for us to see him, receive him, and believe in him?*