

Gospel of John: Introduction

Written and Compiled by Theresa Lisiecki

Introduction

WELCOME to another exciting journey in faith through the study of God's Holy Word in the scriptures. To those who have been coming on Wednesdays welcome back. And to those who are here for the first time, I am excited to see you. As both a way to inform the new and remind the veterans we will begin with prayer and end with prayer. After today and only because today, as the first day of a new study, we need to set down some foundational information there will be the need for me to do a little more formal presentation. But I encourage your comments and questions throughout our weeks together. Truly there is no bad question. Just ask the veterans to my study. What you think is stupid or insignificant can lead to a fascinating discovery or conversation. And if not, I will talk long enough that you will forget the question asked. I will forget the question asked. Seriously though, long ago I learned that if I am wondering about something so is someone else in the room. Questions are the doorway into learning and my favorite way of teaching, so please, please, please ask your questions, make your comments. It is best if you ask during our conversation but if you must I am happy to answer when we are done for the morning, or you can always email me at dre@stcolette.net. So, let us pray

PRAYER

Discussion: Before I get long winded let's hear your voices. What do you know about the Gospel of St. John? What are your questions? Help me to understand why you are here today.

Who is the Author?

As you are already aware, there are four Gospels: Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. The Gospel of John is unique among the four for a variety of reasons. First, is that, while he does not name himself directly, this document is not strictly anonymous. St. John gives us two hints that we find several times throughout the Gospel:

1. The author was an eye witness to the life and teachings of Jesus:
 - a. *...we have seen his glory, (1:14)*
 - b. *He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth. (19:35)*
 - c. *This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them (21:24)*
2. The author identifies himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23;19:26; 20:2; 21:20)

These biblical references along with historical traditional evidence gives scholars their basis in claiming that St. John, one of the twelve Apostles, one of the two sons of Zebedee (Matthew 4:21) is the author. There is more evidence to support this belief:

- The author of this Gospel is clearly an Israelite (Jew)
 - Depth of knowledge of biblical feasts & institutions.

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

Come Holy Spirit,
fill the hearts of Your faithful
and kindle in them the
fire of Your love.
Send forth Your Spirit
and they shall be created;
and You shall renew
the face of the earth.
O God, who by the
light of the Holy Spirit,
did instruct the hearts of the faithful,
grant that by the same Holy Spirit
we may be truly wise
and ever enjoy His consolations,
through Christ Our Lord.
Amen.

- Knowledge of the geography of the Holy Land.
- This “beloved disciple” was one of the twelve with Jesus at the Last Supper (13:23) and with the Apostles after the resurrection (21:4-7)
- The author being “beloved” among Jesus’ followers suggest that he was among Jesus’ inner-inner circle: Peter, James and John.
 - These three are the only three who are renamed (after the initial calling of the twelve)
 - The only Apostles selected by Jesus to accompany Him at key moments (Mark 5:37 Healing of young girl; 9:2 Transfiguration; 14:33 Jesus in Gethsemane)
 - Distinguished from Peter after the resurrection (20:2; 21:20)
 - James died far too early for the authorship of this Gospel
- The attention to detail of the author informs us that he was an eyewitness
 - At the Wedding Feast at Cana, author describes the jars as being filled “up to the brim” (2:7)
 - At the multiplication of loaves, author notes that the loaves were made of barley (6:9)
 - At the anointing of Jesus’ feet, author notes that the perfume was made of “pure nard” (12:3)
- From scholarly tradition: Irenaeus (180AD), Clement of Alexandria (200 AD) and others all proclaim with one voice that John, the Apostle is the author.

There are also reasons as to why St. John the Apostle is not the author of this document which I have outlined in the handout. The main concern or issue has to do with the depth of the theology of the document coming from a man whose main trade was as a fisherman. I leave it up to you as to which school of thought you follow. I present here the idea that St. John, the Apostle was the man who not only authored this document but the Book of Revelation (in which he does identify himself) as well as all three letters. In Pope Benedict’s book *Jesus of Nazareth*, he acknowledges that some scholars have difficulty in seeing St. John as the author of the Gospel because of his simple background as a fisherman: *“Can he, the Galilean fisherman, have been as closely connected with the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem, its language, and its mentality as the Evangelist evidently is? Can he have been related to the family of the high priest, as the text hints (cf. John 18:15)?”* (p. 224). But Pope Benedict goes on to explain that the call to Jewish Temple priesthood was not a full-time job. They discharged their responsibilities twice a year for one week each time. The remainder of the year the Temple priests sought other means to take care of family needs. It is very possible that St. John was a priest of the Temple that when not serving there worked in the family fishing business. Regardless, I leave you to make up your own mind. As for me and this study we will go with the idea that St. John, the Apostle of Christ wrote this document.

Who was this man, John

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I thought I would take a moment to inform us or for some, remind us who this man, St. John, an Apostle for Christ was. Also called St. John the Evangelist or the Divine, he lived in the first century. Believed to be a young man during the life of Christ, St. John was by trade, along with his father Zebedee and brother James (also an Apostle), a fisherman as we read the bible (Matthew 4:21; Mark 1:19; Luke 5:10). Popular tradition connects one of the women who accompanied Mary Magdalene to the tomb, Salome (Mark 15:40; 16:1) as the wife of Zebedee therefore John and James's mother.

After the death and resurrection of Christ St. John took an authoritative position in the early Church working along side Peter, who later left Jerusalem to spread the Gospel, and James, who became the first bishop of Jerusalem. From here St. John's story falls away to conjecture and possibilities. We know that St. John spent time in the penal colony on Patmos island where he wrote the book of Revelation. Most popular believe is that St. John took seriously the call of Christ from the Cross to watch after Mary, the Mother of God (John 19:26-27). After settling Mary in safety in mountain obscurity outside of the city of Ephesus St. John took up residence close by in the city of what is today Selcuk, Turkey establishing a Church there. Most scholars believe that St. John died of natural causes at an old age spending his life, writing, ministering to the churches in Asia Minor (now Turkey) and meditating on the life and teachings of Christ.

Date the Gospel Written

As for when this document was written there are basically two camps: those who believe it was written at the end of the 1st century/beginning of the 2nd century, between 90-105 AD and those who believe the Gospel was written before the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Those in the camp of the "late daters" point to the fact that all scholarship agrees that the Gospel of John was written after the other three. Most scholarship agree that St. Luke, the last of the three synoptic gospels to be written was written after 70 AD because it assumes the destruction of the Temple. Conclusion: if the Gospel of Luke is written soon after 70 AD then the date of the writing of the Gospel of John would be even later in that century.

Those in the camp of the "early daters" look to a small passage within the text: *Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool ...* (5:2). Their premise is that St. John writes as if this pool were intact, unharmed which, if written after 70 AD would have been completely destroyed. In these scholars minds the Gospel of St. John was written around 60 AD, possibly before he wrote the book of Revelation.

Where does the Catholic Church stand in regard to the dating of the document? While they acknowledge that there is much to be said for both camps, generally speaking, (and until there is further evidence to prove so), they hold that the Gospel of John was written after 90 AD.

Who was the Audience

In studying the writings within the bible Catholic scholarship teaches us that it is important to understand just who the document was written for. In knowing the destination, we can better understand the intension or the purpose of the writing. In accepting the premise that St. John wrote this gospel in the later part of the first century, he was most probably writing for the community he served as bishop of Asia Minor (Turkey). And who were those making up the many churches in that area? Mostly Jews who converted to Christianity. We can deduce from St. John’s writing that, not only was he an educated man but quite familiar with the Temple and Temple practices. (This comes from our study of the book of Revelation). So, in support of Pope Benedict’s proposal that St. John was a minor priest of the Temple along with his deep call to evangelize, St. John is also writing to all Jews in hope of bringing about their conversion.

Scholars come to this conclusion, St. John is primarily writing for Jewish Christians and Jews in general, by the distinctly Jewish flavor of his Gospel. St. John refers often to scripture and liturgical symbols that are closely related to the history of Israel. His positive portrayal of the Samaritan also suggest that St. John is seeking to reach out to this community as well. These factors tell us that as we study the Gospel of St. John we will, once again, be reaching into both the Old Testament and 1st Century Jewish practices in our efforts to understand what he has written.

Regardless of the particular audience we can be very certain that St. John has one purpose:

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah¹ the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

This work, this Gospel (as are all the Gospels) is about conversion, belief. And while we might tell ourselves that we believe, and we do; there is always another level we can challenge ourselves to which I pray this study does for each of us.

There is another reason St. John writes and that is to fill in the blanks left by the other three gospels. Here are three examples:

| Synoptic Gospels: Mark, Matthew, Luke | Gospel of St. John |
|--|---|
| Focus on Jesus’s time in Galilee only mentioning traveling to Jerusalem once | Focuses less on Jesus’ travels to Samaria & Galilee but mentions several trips to Jerusalem |
| Jesus’ ministry only seems to begin AFTER the arrest and death of John the Baptist | Jesus’ ministry was well underway BEFORE John the Baptist’s imprisonment |
| Narrate the happenings at the Last Supper | Less about what happened at the Last Supper but offers a theological “Bread of Life” discourse seemingly to explain what Last Supper was about. |

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If we say that the synoptic gospels (Mark Matthew Luke) gives us the flesh bones of the historical Jesus, then the Gospel of John gives us Jesus' spirit. With that in mind, as we approach our work in this coming year of the Gospel of John, in wanting to get the most out of the study it is best to read or reread all three of the synoptic gospels. The more familiar with the historical Jesus the better foundation one has for understanding the mystical spirit of Christ as St. John is about to put forth for us. He writes with the assumption that not only do you know who Jesus is but you are familiar with his life and teachings.

Themes within the Gospel

There are many scholarly opinions how best to approach the content we will find in this gospel. Because I have a simple mind I am going to offer her five main themes that we should be mindful of as we move into our study.

Theme #1: Identity of Jesus

From his opening words to St. John's concluding remarks, this gospel is all about proclaiming that the historical man, Jesus of Nazareth is and was the Messiah, the Son of God. As we study the twenty chapters we will see in every one of them Jesus portrayed as "the light" here on earth to do battle with satan, "the darkness". We see throughout this Gospel St. John identifying Jesus as the Messiah by the titles he offers to name Jesus:

- **Logos:** The word "logos" is Greek for "the word". Logos was the word used in 1st century Jewish prayer and practices to represent God's spoken word. St. John writes that Jesus is the Logos, the Word (or being) of God here on earth. This is further testified to in St. John's gospel by the seven "I am" statements. On the mountain of Hoeb Moses stood before a non-consumed burning bush speaking with God. When Moses asks to whom was he speaking God's response "I am". (Exodus 3) St. John, to show us that it is that same God now incarnate in Jesus Christ we will find seven "I am" statements out of the mouth of Jesus:
 - (1) "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35; see also 41, 48, 51)
 - (2) "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12)
 - (3) "I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7, 9)
 - (4) "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14)
 - (5) "I am the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25)
 - (6) "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6)
 - (7) "I am the vine" (John 15:1, 5)
- **Lamb of God:** This is a second distinctive found particularly in John 1 but the image of Jesus as the Paschal lamb giving His life as sacrifice for our sins. This idea of lamb and sacrifice is a unique theology of the Jews dating all the way back to Genesis of the Old Testament. St. John presents in his Gospel, following the theology of Isaiah's suffering servant (53) that Jesus came

not only to teach and preach but primarily to open the gates of heaven for the salvation of all through His sacrifice of His own life.

Theme #2: Baptism/Jesus is the Water of Life

We all know that water is essential for life. In the Gospel of John, St. John seeks to show that as essential as water is for physical life so Christ is for our spiritual life. Here are seven examples we will explore in coming weeks:

- (1) Christ turns water to wine (John 2)
- (2) Christ's discourse on Living Waters at Jacob's well (John 4)
- (3) Christ heals the invalid man at the Pools of Bethesda (John 5)
- (4) Christ walks on water (John 6)
- (5) Christ offers living water during Feast of Tabernacles (John 7)
- (6) Christ heals the man born blind at the Pool of Siloam (John 9)
- (7) Christ washes the feet of the twelve (John 13)

Interestingly, the Gospel of St. John is the only gospel that does not write of Jesus' baptism but it is the only one that shows baptism as an important part of His ministry (John 3:22, 4:2).

Theme #3: Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish Practices

From the beginning of salvation history, since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, God promised to send one to bring us back into union with Him. Over the course of many centuries the Israelites developed prayers and practices to help develop and support the faith life of its members, just as Churches do today. St. John knew his Jewish faith very well and could see that most Jews did not, and as such could not see the significance of what Jesus did. I would venture to guess this is true of most Christians today – not knowing their faith well enough to understand the fullness of what Jesus did for us. In the Gospel of St. John we will find how Jesus was the fulfillment of all that God promised throughout the history of the Israelites. And, that through Jesus what was, in terms of ritual practices and prayers, took on a deeper fulfilled meaning and without Jesus they were just empty practices and beliefs. Here are a few examples:

- (1) The Body of Christ (both Jesus and the Church) replace the Temple.[John 2:13-22]
- (2) The replacement of the worship in the sacred mountains of Gerizim and Ebal with the worship of Christ [John 4]
- (3) The replacement of the Sabbath worship of the Pharisees with the proper worship of the Sabbath taught by Christ [John 5]
- (4) The replacement and fulfillment of the Feast of the Passover with Christ in the Eucharist, the Bread of life [John 6]
- (5) The replacement and fulfillment of the Feast of the Tabernacles with Christ, the light and life of the world [John 7-9]

Other Points of Interest

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- 1. The Gospel of St. John uses (of the four gospels) the most metaphors for Jesus.** In theological terms within Jesus' teaching there is the great "Messianic secret". Jesus would not only outright state who He was (God's own son) but more often than not hint at his identity. Scholars suggest so as to give people the freedom to choose in belief. Here are a couple of those metaphors:
 - a. *Then Jesus declared, "I am the **bread of life**. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty"* John 6:35
 - b. *When Jesus spoke again to the people he said, "I am the **light of the world**. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* John 8:12
 - c. *"I am the **vine; you are the branches**. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."* John 15:5
- 2. St. John shows Apostles bringing each other to Jesus.** Yes, they were called, but as you and I were introduced to Christ and faith by someone in our lives (such as our parents or grandparents), only in the Gospel of St. John do we see the disciples bringing their friends and family to meet Jesus.
 - a. Andrew brings brother Peter. John 1:41
 - b. Philip introduces Jesus to Nathanael. John 1:45
- 3. St. John has a special concern for "those who have not seen".** Yes, the gospel was written for Christians to fortify their faith, to learn of Christ and His teachings and life. But there are too many passages that address moving from belief to unbelief (John 20:29), from blindness to sight (John 20:28) to ignore. As one author put it: *The gospel of John was written for people who could not touch the wounds of Christ or witness His miracles"* Traci Drum
- 4. Death and Resurrection unique among the Gospels.** Matthew, Mark and Luke portray the death of Christ from what is called "Atonement Theology". Jesus has come to atone for the sins of humanity through his own death. The Gospel of St. John presents the death of Jesus as His glorification and return to the father, almost as a lead in to the Book of Revelation
- 5. Discourses of Jesus.** In the synoptic gospels, when Jesus speaks we have short, sometimes pithy. In the gospel of St. John if in your bible the words of Christ are in red there will be sections that go on for pages with no black ink. St. John writes out the long discourses or teachings of Christ.
- 6. In the Gospel of St. John we travel with Jesus three years.** In the synoptic the ministry of Jesus takes a single year. Also, in many ways you can lay Matthew, Mark and Luke down side by side and they pretty much follow the same sequence of events. In John events are not included or not in the same order, the date of the crucifixion is different and the cleansing of the Temple begins at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than at the end as the other authors have depicted.

Finally we come to the outline of the Gospel which I have placed in a separate handout. What is important for our conversation today is to be aware that St. John wrote the gospel separating it into

two parts. After the introduction the first part is the Book of Signs going for twelve chapters. Within it we will study the miracles and teachings of Christ and cover most of Jesus' three years of public ministry. The last eight chapters is called the Book of Glory and covers Jesus' Last Supper discourse, His passion, death and resurrection. Why did St. John sculpture his gospel this way? All the gospel writing created their text with one purpose and goal: to bring people to belief in Jesus Christ. St. John chooses particular stories and "signs", puts them in a specific order in hopes that it will catch peoples imagination and understandings and bring them to belief.

So there we have it, a short foundation of the Gospel of St. John in hopes that with this foundation we will have a better study. I look forward to the coming weeks our discussion and discovery.

With that we end today's study with a few questions to ponder:

1. What do you hope to learn or find as we proceed with this study?
2. Who has inspired you to faith? And how did they do that? Through what they said? Taught? How they lived?
3. Presented with the idea that each of us are meant to write our own gospel, tell our own story of the salvation we can find only in Jesus Christ, what would you write?

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