

John's gospel, an introduction

Our aim as we read, study and learn John's gospel together is that we will become more established in the faith and better followers of Jesus (cf Romans 16:25). May we read the gospel for ourselves and allow it to speak to us personally.

To begin we will look not only at the beginning but also at the end of the gospel. John begins, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1), and ends, *Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written* (John 21:25), (which is a bit of a hyperbole!)

But the point is well made, there was so much John could write about Jesus. If we assume, as most do, that John was writing in the mid-late 80'sAD, then John is later than Matthew, Mark and Luke (the Synoptic gospels), and he has clearly chosen to write a gospel which is somewhat different.

There are of course similarities between John and the Synoptics. All four gospels, a) tell the story of Jesus Christ; b) include the major events of Jesus' life, public ministry, death on the cross, and resurrection from the grave; c) tell of his ministry in Galilee (Mark 1:14, John 4:3) and final days in Jerusalem; d) contain some of the same events such as the feeding of the 5000 (Mark 6:34-44; John 6:1-15), Jesus walking on water (Mark 6:45-54; John 6:16-21), and in particular many of the events of the passion week (e.g. Luke 22:47-53, John 18:2-12); e) include the conflict Jesus had with the religious and secular authorities of the day; f) focus on Jesus' core teachings in regard to the call to repentance, the new covenant and Jesus' divine nature. John does not contradict the other gospels (although there are some challenges in this regard), but John is obviously different.

A major difference is the way in which John is structured. We can illustrate this using the Christmas story. It is easy to make a nativity play from the birth stories of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, dressing up all the characters and so on. But try acting out, *In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God!*

Of course, it would not be impossible, but certainly much more challenging. John contains fewer characters, fewer places, and contains long speeches (discourses) usually by Jesus. The Synoptic gospels follow the same narrative template, and include many of the same parables, miracles and teachings. John follows a different script and has his own drum beat. His gospel can be divided into 4 major sections:

1. An introduction / prologue (1:1-18);
2. The Book of Signs (1:19-12:50) – Jesus' messianic miracles, called 'signs', performed for the benefit of the Jews;
3. The Book of Exaltation / Glory (13:1-20:31)
4. An epilogue (John 21)

John has nothing to say about kingdom parables, demon exorcisms, healing of lepers, tax collectors, Sadducees, Jesus being a friend of sinners, the nativity stories of Jesus, the temptations of Jesus, the transfiguration, sermon on the mount material, the institution of the Lord's supper.

On the other hand John includes a lot of material not found in the Synoptics ... after all he has much to choose from: encounters with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman; the 'I am' sayings of Jesus; long speeches (discourses) usually by Jesus; foot washing; Jesus' conversation with Pilate; changing

water into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11); healing the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (John 5:1-15); healing the royal official's son (John 4:46-54); healing the man born blind (Jn 9:1-7); and the raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-45).

John has his own unique vocabulary and frequently uses words such as, *truth, witness, world, abide, love, believe, light, darkness, Father and Son*. It will be important for us to understand what he means by these words, and what he does not mean.

Overall the narrative approach of the Synoptics moves the reader forward to the conclusion. John however, is more of a reflection and exploration of the events in Jesus' life. Nevertheless, each gospel presents Jesus in its own unique way. The portrait of Jesus presented by each gospel writer has often been linked to the four living creatures around the throne (Revelation 4:7).

In Matthew, Jesus is the LION, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the King. In Mark, Jesus is the OX, the servant (worker), who lays down his as a ransom for many. In Luke, Jesus is the Son of MAN, more than the other gospels fully human, with compassion for the marginalised. In John, Jesus is the FLYING EAGLE, the Divine Son of God.

It is interesting to note that the Jews were expecting a Messiah (and still are) who will be a king, a man and a saviour of God's oppressed people. What they never expected, and in truth what none of us really expect, is for Jesus to be Divine. John's gospel is in many ways the Alps or the Himalayas of Scripture (cf Habukkuk 3:19), and it is one of the most significant books in the New Testament.

Many have questioned whether John the Apostle was really the author. But the second century church father, Irenaeus said, *John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.*¹

John had a uniquely close relationship with the Master. John said, *we beheld his glory* (John 1:14), which I think likely is a reference to the Transfiguration (although not full description of it.) John was there, but Matthew, Mark and Luke were not. Only John witnessed the crucifixion, while the rest ran away. It was to John that Jesus entrusted, from the cross, the care of his mother. John lived much longer than the other disciples, dying it is believed in 98AD. So he had time to witness the development of the early church with all its failures and problems. And it was to John that the risen Lord gave the Revelation on the Isle of Patmos. No wonder John's gospel is so different!

But the real uniqueness of John is in his focus on the relationship of the Father and the Son. There is no doubt that we have in John what we would call a high Christology (the study of the nature of Jesus Christ.) In John above all, (although by no means exclusively,) Jesus is presented as Divine. It is in John that Jesus, a) is the Word who was with God and who was God (John 1:1), and who became flesh, and dwelt among us (John 1:1,14); b) makes himself equal with God His Father (John 5:18, 10:33) c) is one with the Father (John 10:30); d) is in the words of Thomas the Doubter, both Lord and God. e) who has all authority to execute judgment and to give eternal life (John 5:27, 17:2); f) and, who is uniquely the way to the Father (John 14:6), for anyone who has seen the Son has seen the Father (John 14:9).

In many ways the favourite verse for Evangelicals sums up the theology of John,

John 3:16 *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

It is this gospel we are going to delve into.

¹ Against Heresies, BibleWorks 8.0 Schaff, Early Church Fathers