

Introducing the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John is the fourth and probably last written of the four Gospels. Like the other three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) it tells the story of Jesus, but does so in quite a different way. It is written in fairly simple Greek and at one level is quite easy to understand. At another level it is the most profound Gospel and gives the impression of having been written by someone close to Jesus who has spent the rest of their life pondering more and more deeply about who Jesus is and what he said and did.

The Gospel of John is sometimes called the ‘theological’ Gospel as it reflects deeply on the **identity of Jesus and his relationship with God**. These are the two main themes of the story that John presents.

The Gospel of John seems to assume that readers already know the basic outline of Jesus’ life from reading one of the other Gospels and wants to add depth to the Jesus story. So the author has mostly chosen to highlight different incidents from Jesus’ ministry, has a different geographical focus (mostly in Jerusalem) and timetable (clearing of the temple happens at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry rather than at the end), and has Jesus speaking in long monologues rather than using parables and short pithy sayings.

This last difference perhaps explains why John rarely features in the weekly Lectionary of church readings, because there is often not much action and the monologues don’t lend themselves well to preaching week by week. If the structure of the first three Gospels is sometimes compared to pearls on a string (a series of self-contained incidents), then the fourth Gospel is more like a complex piece of music that features just a few main themes with multiple variations on these themes.

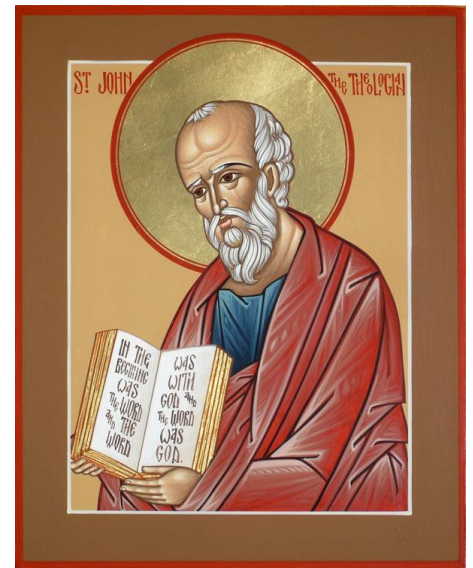
Who was John?

Traditionally the author of the fourth Gospel is Jesus’ disciple John, son of Zebedee and the brother of James. He could also be another disciple named ‘John’ who lived in Jerusalem where most of the action takes place. He may be one of the two disciples introduced in chapter 1 as followers of John the Baptist (see John 1:35-40). Within the narrative of the Gospel, the author refers to himself (without apparent embarrassment) as the disciple whom Jesus loved (see John 13:23, 19:26-27, 21:7, 21:20, 21:24).

John’s telling of the Jesus story and key themes

As suggested already, much of what is contained in the first three Gospels is omitted by John. There is no nativity story about Mary, Joseph and the birth of Jesus, there is very little interaction with the disciples, almost no moral teaching or parables, no exorcisms, few healings and no Last Supper.

The geographical and theological map of the story is also quite different. In the first three Gospels, Jesus is born in Bethlehem (the expected birthplace of the Messiah), begins his ministry in Galilee and travels slowly to Jerusalem, teaching the disciples along the way, with the story reaching its climax with Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. The story is presented **‘from below’** as the crowds and the disciples – and we readers! – try to work out who this person Jesus really is. A major turning point occurs when Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah and at this point Jesus turns towards Jerusalem and the conflict and climax that awaits him there.



John's story, by contrast, is told '**from above**' and operates on two distinct levels or two storeys. The upper level is heaven where God dwells, where Jesus' origin is, and where Jesus will return after the resurrection. Jesus is sent by God from heaven to earth, carrying or bringing God's light and life, grace and truth.

The second level or storey where most of the action happens is on earth, which is characterized as a place of darkness, unbelief and death. God's aim is to bring light and life to the world and for all to believe in Jesus as God's Son and in God as Father. As people respond positively to Jesus and have faith in him they receive God's blessing of (eternal) life and are enabled to move to the higher (heavenly) storey by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit/Son. Those who reject Jesus do not receive God's life and remain condemned and in darkness.

Jesus is the **point of connection** between the two levels – between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. In this way, Jesus is presented as the **new temple of God** who embodies all that the temple was intended to be.

The **plot** of John's Gospel is like an extended **debate** or **trial** between Jesus and his critics, characterized broadly as 'the Jews'. In chapters 1-12 this trial or debate is public and it then continues in private in chapters 13-20 with the disciples and with Pilate. The form of the trial may be based on the similar theme in Isaiah chapters 40-55 where God, the Holy One of Israel, is under trial by both Israel and the nations. In these Isaiah chapters, God also acts as accuser and judge, just as Jesus does throughout his extended 'trial'.

John's style

John's Gospel uses symbolism and language in a distinctive way.

In Hebrew thought, **seven** is considered the number of wholeness or completion because God created the earth and the heavens in seven days. In John's Gospel we find seven '**I am**' sayings that each reveal something about the identity of Jesus and his relationship with God (I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the gate for the sheep, I am the Good Shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth and the life, I am the true vine).

Likewise there are seven key **signs** that point to Jesus' authority and origin (water turned to wine, healing of the official's son, healing the lame man, feeding of the 5000, walking on the water, healing of the man born blind, the raising of Lazarus from death). There are seven **titles** given to Jesus in John chapter 1 (Word of God, Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, Messiah, King of Israel, Son of Man) and seven **testimonies** offered confirming the identity of Jesus (by John the Baptist, Philip, the woman at the well, the Scriptures, the man born blind, Martha, Thomas).

Most readers of John's Gospel will pick up the repeated use of **dualism** – two contrasting positions that are like black and white. So in this Gospel we have light and darkness, life and death, belief and unbelief, truth and lies, love and hatred. This stylistic feature reflects John's **setting** and **purpose in writing** – he wants the hearer to make a deliberate response to Jesus – either faith in Jesus or rejection of Jesus. This may well reflect the social setting of the Gospel where disciples needed to choose to either follow Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (and thus remain part of the Christian community) or reject the claims of Jesus and remain in the Jewish faith (and thus be accepted by the Jewish synagogue). We may find this dualism unsettling and challenging and wish for more grey!

7 "I AM" Statements

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| 1. "I am the bread of life" | John 6:35 |
| 2. "I am the light of the world" | John 8:12 |
| 3. "I am the door for 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, and the truth, and the life" | John 14:6 |
| 7. "I am the true vine" | John 15:1, 5 |

Other features of John's style are his consistent use of **irony** (e.g. High Priest's declaration that it is better for one man die for the people than have the nation destroyed), **misunderstanding** (e.g. Nicodemus's inability to grasp what being born again means) and **author's voice** that blends seamlessly with the voice of Jesus (e.g. read John 3:10-21 and try to work out where the words of Jesus finish and the words of John begin).

A few key passages and verses ...

- In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... No one has ever seen God. It is the God the only Son who has made him known. (John 1:1-18)
- For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)
- Truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for what the Father does the Son does likewise. (John 5:19)
Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:8)
- If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. (John 8:31-32)
- I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)
- I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples. (John 13:34-35)
- The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)
- Pilate asked him 'What is truth?' (John 18:38)
- Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. (John 20:21)
- Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

References

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