

Introduction

Gospel of John



A Book of Signs and Glory

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

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Gospel of John Introductory Material

Authorship

The word Gospel means “good news.” But is this particular account of the good news of Jesus Christ really what it says it is—an eyewitness report prepared by the apostle John? The tradition of the Church, supported by an unbroken line of testimony from the patristic Fathers as well as by evidence in the biblical text itself, attests that it is.

Scholars know, for example, that St. Irenaeus, a 2nd-century Church Father from Asia Minor, received the Gospel from St. Polycarp; St. Polycarp is said to have heard it directly from the lips of the apostle John. Writing sometime around 180 A.D., St. Irenaeus tells us that the Evangelist John consigned the fourth Gospel to writing while living in Ephesus. St. Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus about 190 A.D., confirms that the apostle John lived and died in that city (some minor traditions suggest that John may have lived in Antioch or Alexandria). Numerous witnesses in the second and third centuries corroborate this testimony of Sts. Irenaeus and Polycrates.

Elements within the fourth Gospel itself strongly suggest its author is John, a fisherman from Galilee and one of the two sons of Zebedee who became disciples of Jesus. No other disciple corresponds to the biblical description of the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (*Jn* 13:23), upon whose eyewitness testimony this Gospel claims to rest. In numerous ways, the Gospel that bears John’s name also bears the mark of someone who actually was present at the events it reports. Yet the author stands outside the traditions related in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all of which give very similar accounts of Jesus’ life. That the author of the Gospel of John was a Jew familiar with the conditions of Palestinian Judaism at the time of Jesus is unmistakable—archeology confirms details such as the pool of Bethzatha and The Pavement where the trial of Jesus took place. That the author also was a member of Jesus’ inner circle—consisting of Peter, James and John (*Gal* 2:9)—is highly likely given that scholars know he was the same disciple who laid his head on Jesus’ breast at the Last Supper. Since the biblical text distinguishes between Peter and the “beloved disciple” who recorded these events, and since James was martyred long before the Gospel was written (*Acts* 12:2), the apostle John almost certainly is its author.

Location, Audience, and Date

Several bits of evidence lean toward confirming that the Gospel of John was indeed written at Ephesus. Ephesus is the traditional site where the Assumption of Mary is believed to have taken place, and it's long been held that Mary lived there with John, the "beloved disciple," after Jesus commended her to his care (*Jn* 19:26-27). A considerable portion of material in the fourth Gospel appears to be addressed to disciples of John the Baptist who apparently hadn't accepted the Baptist's full testimony to Jesus as Lord. Acts 18:24-25 and Acts 19:1-5 indicate there was a sect centered in Ephesus to whom the apostles repeatedly addressed pleas to follow Jesus Christ.

In addition, the vocabulary used is of Aramaic origin adapted into Greek to serve the needs of a well-educated audience of Jewish and Greek converts. The Evangelist assumes that his readers already are familiar with the other three Gospels—instead of recapping those writings, he adds new details and explains in greater depth the meaning of the recorded signs. Finally, John's Gospel also assumes a great deal of familiarity with the sacramental life of the Church and with the Hebrew Scriptures. This is consistent with the fact that the New Testament epistle considered to be the most sophisticated exposition of theology also is associated with Ephesus: St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. It's worth noting, that the Evangelist gives no indication he's writing only for readers in the Ephesus area, and archeological evidence suggests that very early John's Gospel spread rapidly over the entire Mediterranean region. Taking the mission entrusted to the disciples with utmost seriousness, the apostle John was writing the good news of Jesus for all who would believe and "have life in his name" (*Jn* 20:31).

Hands other than John's may have been involved in the final editing of the fourth Gospel, but even these bear consistent witness to the preponderance of evidence that the apostle John is the author and that these writings are his eyewitness memories of the words and works of Jesus. Most scholars believe the Gospel probably was edited into its present form between 90 and 100 A.D., based on a tradition that isn't documented until the end of the third century. Mention is made in the Gospel, however, of a pool "near the Sheep Gate" in Jerusalem (*Jn* 5:2), and the author refers to this gate as though it's still in existence at the time he's writing. Since the city was reduced to a heap of rubble by the Romans in 70 A.D., this strongly suggests that John's Gospel could have been written perhaps as many as 10 years before the destruction of Jerusalem.

Themes

The Gospel of John can be divided into four parts. The prologue (*Jn* 1:1-18) introduces the major themes of the work and acts as one of a pair of book ends with the epilogue (*Jn* 21:1-25) acting as the other. In the middle are two sections that scholars often refer to as the Book of Signs (*Jn* 1:19—12:50) and the Book of Glory (*Jn* 13:1—20:31).

The Book of Signs (*Jn* 1:19—12:50) focuses on the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. For John, the word "signs" is significant. The wonders Jesus performs aren't simply random displays by a gifted man—they unveil the power of God. To draw attention to Jesus' divinity, John focuses on a number of signs—the miracle at Cana (*Jn* 2:1-11), the healing of the official's son (*Jn* 4:46-54), the healing of the paralytic (*Jn* 5:1-9), the multiplication of the loaves (*Jn* 6:1-14), walking on water (*Jn* 6:16-21), the restoration of sight to the blind man (*Jn* 9:1-41), and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (*Jn* 11:17-44). These signs—and the Resurrection of Jesus himself (*Jn* 20:1-10),

which occurs as part of the Book of Glory—point to one thing: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. They do so in order that believers “may have life in his name” (*Jn* 20:31).

A major turning point in the fourth Gospel occurs at the juncture of chapters 11 and 12. There two things happen—the Jewish religious leaders resolve to kill Jesus and, at almost the same moment, Gentiles ask to see Jesus. Until this moment, Jesus has insisted that his “hour has not yet come” (*Jn* 2:4). With Jewish leaders determined he must die and Gentiles seeking him, Jesus declares that his “hour” *has* come (*Jn* 12:23). Like the seed that falls into the ground and dies, then brings forth fruit (*Jn* 12:24), Jesus also intends to die—but his death will bring salvation to all the nations. The plot against him and his resulting Passion and death aren’t unforeseen tragedies. Rather, Jesus tells Andrew and Philip that it’s “for this purpose I have come to this hour” (*Jn* 12:27).

With this announcement, the Evangelist (a term used to identify any of the four writers of the Gospels; in this case, the apostle John) ushers in the Book of Glory (*Jn* 13:1—20:31). From now on Jesus reveals himself not through signs and wonders but through his Passion, death and Resurrection. In the Book of Signs, Jesus achieves public successes. In the Book of Glory, Jesus’ apparent failures are no longer about earthly success but about eternal life. It’s here, in fact, that Jesus shows his followers the God-appointed way to transcendent glory: In living out his own climactic teaching of the Book of Signs Jesus will, in his very person, undergo humiliation, rejection, betrayal, suffering, and death in order to demonstrate that the way to glory is through loving submission to the will of the Father. In this Jesus will act as a great pioneer, showing the way required for each person—and ultimately the whole of creation—to enter into the glory of the Trinitarian life. Fittingly, the Book of Glory culminates with the Resurrection. The final section of the fourth Gospel is the epilogue (*Jn* 21:1-25). Here, John records Jesus’ final Resurrection appearances in Galilee and his commissioning of Peter.

Theology

Of the four Gospel writers, John develops the most profound theology. More passages relate to the Blessed Trinity in his Gospel than in the books written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined. John also develops the theology of faith in much greater depth than do the writers of these three synoptic Gospels. Sacramental imagery fills John’s Gospel with meditations on the meaning of Baptism, Eucharist, Matrimony, and the other sacraments. And although Luke’s Gospel devotes more text to the Blessed Virgin Mary, John’s work is arguably the more Mariological. John determinedly points to the significance of Mary as the new Eve and to Mary’s role as Mother of the Church. But John’s favorite theme is love (this theme dominates his epistles as well). For John, love constitutes the new Law: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (*Jn* 15:12).

In a category by itself is the fourth Gospel’s extremely important focus on the theme of family, both human and divine. Nearly every chapter contains familial imagery. The Blessed Trinity is the divine family—the Father loves the Son; the Son gives himself as a perfect self-offering of love to the Father; and the special mission of the Spirit is to bring every human being into this divine family. Through the sacrament of Baptism, Christians enter into the Trinitarian life of God and continue to be perfected by grace through participation in the other sacraments. The human family images the love of the Blessed Trinity.

Outline of the Gospel of John

1. **Prologue: Assertion of Major Themes (1:1-18)**
2. **The Book of Signs (1:19—12:50)**
 - A. New Creation (1:19—2:11)
 - B. New Life in Signs (2:12—4:54)
 - C. Light and Darkness (5:1—10:42)
 - D. Last Journey to Jerusalem (11:1—12:50)
3. **The Book of Glory (13:1—20:31)**
 - A. Jesus Instructs His Disciples (13:1—17:26)
 - B. Glorification (18:1—20:31)
4. **Epilogue: Appearance in Galilee (21:1-25)**

Catechism Connections

- To learn the three criteria the Church teaches for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit, see paragraphs 112-114 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*.
- For more information about the ways in which Jesus' signs contribute to faith and understanding, see CCC 156.
- To read more about how the human family reflects the image of the love of the Blessed Trinity, see CCC 2205.

Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II called the Bible the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are: knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that ‘all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us; and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

—speaking to the 2004 assembly
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

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