

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN OVERVIEW

Stephen Tong: the Gospel of John is the greatest book that a Christian would ever have!

The late Regent College N.T. scholar and professor Gordon Fee: "It is the most profound Christian book ever written, yet it has a surface simplicity, written in almost primer Greek."

Others: It is a book in which a child can wade, and an elephant can swim.

And Rev Sidlow Baxter said in *Explore the Book*, the commendations of bible scholars and saints on JOHN can be compiled into a thick book!

We will be studying the gospel of John (here onwards refer to as JOHN) together under the theme "**Who Is Jesus?**". We expect to study the book in about 30 lessons. We hope that, whether we are young believer or Christians of many years, the Holy Spirit will illumine us with in-depth knowledge of who Jesus of Nazareth truly is, and with this knowledge from above we will love him with our whole heart with no reservations, and follow him with our whole life with no regrets!

We will use Rev Stephen Tong's exposition on JOHN and 20c renounced N.T. scholar and pastor F.F. Bruce's commentary as our main source of reference. This introduction is mainly adapted from Prof Gordon Fee's course "The NT Survey".

A. Authorship

Though there is no explicit statement that reveal the author of this gospel, it is generally accepted that the fourth Gospel is written by John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve. This is because beginning from 13:23, there emerged an unnamed disciple, five times referred to as "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" – at the last supper (13:23), at the foot of the cross (19:26), at the empty tomb (20:2) and at Sea of Tiberias (21:7,20).

This unnamed disciple was singled out as the witness who "wrote" these things in verse 21:20-24.

"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." 21:24

As verse 21:2 mentioned seven persons who was with the risen Lord by the lake of Tiberias – Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, 2 other disciples - and *the disciple whom Jesus loved* has to be one of the latter four, which include John.

Traditionally Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp and a bishop in the 2nd century, identifies this disciple with John the son of Zebedee.

Interestingly, John did not mention his name in JOHN at all. Nonetheless, we can find great encouragement from his life as a disciple of Christ:

1. Among the apostles he was the youngest and was the last to die. When all the apostles were martyred, John was still around and he continued to build up the church and proclaim Jesus and the Gospel. Therefore do not look down on yourself because you are younger in age, rather humble yourself and equip yourself diligently, be prepared to be used by God in whatever way at whatever time and submit to God's moulding according to His good purpose for you and your life (1Ti 4:12).
2. John was a hot-tempered man (Jesus called him Boanerges which means Son of Thunder, Mark 3:17); but he was transformed by the resurrection power of the Gospel and he taught and walked the most about love. He was thus called the Apostle of love by the early church. Let us not underestimate the power of the Gospel in changing even our innate nature; be prepared to be transformed by it!
3. John was the only apostle that accompanied Jesus when he was on the cross. Many bible scholars believe that experience plays a large part in his transformation into an apostle of love. Let us come near to Jesus

daily through reading the bible, and we too will be able to draw the power from the cross to overcome our weaknesses.

B. Relationship with Synoptic Gospels

The gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because they share a common source of oral traditions. Apparently JOHN has a different source and that makes JOHN different from the three synoptic Gospels in many ways. Here are a few major differences for us to take note:

1. Focus on Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem

John focuses on Jesus' work in Jerusalem. He began with the public ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem, and recorded a total of five trips there.

2. No messianic secret

While the synoptics recorded many times Jesus warned the people not to tell others about the miracle he had performed, JOHN kept no secret about Jesus' identity as the Messiah. In fact He openly confessed Jesus as the Messiah from the outset through:

- John the Baptist's twofold witnesses (1:29-34)
- Disciples (1:35-2:11)
- Samaritan woman (4:24-26, 42)
- Feeding of the five thousands (6:14)
- Seven "I am" self-proclamation of the Messiah

In JOHN, Jesus openly declares himself to be the Messiah, the Revealer of God and possessor of unique Sonship (1:51, 4:26, 5:17, 6:34-58).

3. Miracles are signs

The word "miracle" (Greek "dynamis") is not used in JOHN. All miracles are called signs instead. This is because John sees all the miracles as signs pointing beyond the event itself to a greater meaning – Jesus is God himself. This is the message in every miracle Jesus performed: *"And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."* 17:3

4. Missing items

The following common narratives in the Synoptics are missing in John:

- Baptism (narrated by John the Baptist)
- Testing in the desert
- Casting out of demons
- Transfiguration
- The Lord's Supper

5. Difference between JOHN and the Synoptics

The main differences lie in the nature and the form of Jesus' teaching.

- While in the synoptics Jesus' teaching focuses on the Kingdom of God, JOHN only mentioned Kingdom of God twice (3:3, 3:5) and he focuses on the person of Jesus instead.
- Most of Jesus' sayings recorded in the synoptics are succinct, pithy, memorable sayings, while in JOHN most of them are long discourses, e.g. the vine and the branch in ch. 15.

- The synoptics have a collection of parables while JOHN uses symbolic language frequently.

6. Purpose of JOHN

If we compare the purpose of JOHN (20:30-31) and LUKE (1:1-4),

“³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ 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.” (John 20:30-31)

“...To write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things of which you have been taught.” (Luke 1:1-4)

From chapter two to chapter 12, John presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the expectation of the Jewish Messiah in the various festivals. He also include the seven great “I am” statements of Jesus as the bread of Life , good shepherd, light in the world, gate of the sheepfold, true vine, “way, truth and life”, “resurrection and life”. These are symbolic objects for the Messiah in the Old Testament and are familiar to the Jews.

But John did not write the gospel with only the Jews in mind. He is challenging the Greek philosophical thoughts of the Hellenistic world that are infiltrating the early churches, such as Gnosticism, the stoicism...etc. The divine writer, nonetheless, inspired John in the foreknowledge of the emergence of various heresies throughout history till the end of the age as the church prospers the Gospel. We can find answers in the gospel of JOHN to discern and refute them.

7. JOHN the Spiritual Gospel

While the synoptics was written to tell us what happened, John wrote to tell us what does it all mean; or we can say that the synoptics’ purpose is historical while JOHN’s is theological. John makes explicit what is merely implicit in the Synoptic tradition. This is why when we read JOHN, we read things at two levels: the historical situation and its spiritual significance.

For example, in JOHN we realized from the very lips of our Saviour that the Jacob’s ladder signifies Himself being the only way to God; another example is the bronze snake of Jesus foretells His crucifixion. Also, the entire book is filled with the revelation of the three-person character of God. And JOHN is filled with such spiritual teaching.

As Clement of Alexandria, the 2nd century Christian apologist to the Hellenistic world, said,

“John, last of all, conscious that the outward facts had been set forth in the Gospels, was urged by his disciples, and divinely moved by the Spirit, composed **a spiritual gospel.**”

C. Structure

We will be studying JOHN according to this structure in three main parts: A Hymn to the eternal Word, the book of signs, and the book of Glory.

I. **Prologue – A hymn to the Eternal Word** (1:1-18)

II. **The Book of Signs of the Messiah** (1:19-12:50)

A. The Word manifested to the disciples (1:19-2:11)

The New Beginning – the first week of messianic ministry climaxed by the sign at Cana

- B. The Word manifested to the world (2:12-12:50)
 - 1. The first Passover (2:13 – 4:54)
 - 2. The Sabbath “feast” (5:1-47)
 - 3. The Second Passover (6:1-71)
 - 4. The Feast of Tabernacles (7:1-9:41)
 - 5. The Feast of Dedication (ch. 10)
 - 6. Prelude to the Final Passover (11:1-12:50)
 - 7. Conclusion – Jewish unbelief (12:37-50)
- III. **The Final Passover – The Book of Glory** (13:1-20:29)
 - A. Jesus and the disciples (13-17)
 - 1. The foot-washing (13:1-30) “as I, so you”
 - 2. The table-talks (13:31-16:33) “I am going, you are staying”
 - 3. The Priestly prayer (ch. 17) “that they may be one”
 - B. The Passion (18:1 – 19:42)
 - C. The Resurrection appearances (20:1-31)
- IV. **Epilogue** (ch.21)

D. Closing

As the synoptic gospels walk us with Jesus as he preached the Kingdom of God and perform numerous miracles, we are amazed at the wondrous **work of Jesus**. Nonetheless, we do not know much about **who Jesus is**. JOHN tells us that Jesus is none other than the visitation on earth of the eternal God himself. With this, hence, the gospel of John makes the gospel complete.

We thank God for making His revelation complete. What a wonderful Saviour we have! Let us come close to Jesus, love him, praise him, exalt him, proclaim him and look forward to the glorious day when we see him with our eyes, hear his voice with our ears and touch him with our hands, and can confidently say to our Lord “Lord, I am the disciple whom you love”!