

That You May Know

A Verse-by-Verse Study of the Gospel of John

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Welcome to our verse-by-verse study of the Gospel of John.

You are about to embark on a life-changing and challenging journey into what is probably the best-loved of the four gospels. My prayer is that your relationship with Jesus will be enriched by this study, as you come face-to-face with the person and work of Christ.

The Gospel of John is a complex theological tapestry, that weaves narrative accounts of the life and work of Jesus, with deep theology on His divine nature. Although the book is filled with rich and compelling accounts of the acts of Jesus during His three-and-a-half year ministry here on earth, it is His identity and the purpose of His work that are of greater importance to the writer.

1) JOHN: THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE

Before we dig into the content, we first need some background information of the man and message of John. To do this, we will ask the four interrogative questions of who, when, why, and where to discover more about the history, geography, purpose, and content of the book.

WHO WAS JOHN?

The author of the fourth gospel is not named anywhere in the book. This is not unusual because a Gospel differs in literary style from the epistles. For example, Paul begins each of his letters with a greeting that was typical of the time. This included both the name of the recipients and the sender (e.g. Colossians 1:1-2). In fact, none of the gospel writers identify themselves. This, however, does not mean that we cannot know who the authors of these books were, for there are three other means of identifying them available to us.

1. **Biblical Evidence:** an author may indirectly reveal things about himself within his writing, or other writers or verses from other books may provide evidence and clarity.
2. **Writing Style:** an author may use a writing style and phraseology that is similar to other works where the writer is known.
3. **Church Tradition:** the author may have been identified early in church history.

In the case of the Gospel of John, there is compelling Biblical evidence and church tradition that help to identify the author.

1. Biblical Evidence

Several verses indicate that the author is of Jewish descent based on his knowledge and use of the Old Testament (cf. 6:45; 13:18; 19:36-37). Others give evidence that he is from the land of Israel as he has first-hand knowledge of Israel's geography (cf. 1:44; 2:1; 5:2; 9:7; 11:18). But these two factors are insufficient to identify the author as they could refer to any Jew living in Israel at the time.

Further internal indicators help us to significantly narrow the possibilities and give us clear evidence of the author's identity:

- He is an eyewitness of the events recorded (cf. 1:29, 35, 43; 2:6; 4:40, 43; 5:5; 12:1, 6, 12). This means that he had to have been one of the many who followed Jesus throughout most of His ministry.
- He reveals that he is "*the disciple Jesus loved*" (cf. 21:20, 24) and is the one who leans on Jesus' breast at the Passover meal (cf. 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7). Although this does not provide a name, it implies that the author has a very close and personal relationship with Jesus, and that He was in the Upper Room on the night of the last supper. This further limits the number of candidates.
- Although John does not state that he is one of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, by comparing certain verses with the other gospels, we learn that the author is indeed one of the inner circle. Matthew 17:1, Mark 5:37 and 14:33 name Peter, and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, as the inner circle. In the case of Matthew and Mark, neither author describes things from the perspective of being on the inside, only from an outside, third-party perspective. John, however, is able to describe things from an inside, more personal perspective. This, therefore, limits the number to only three of Jesus' followers—Peter and the brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee (cf. 13:23-24; 20:2-10; 21:2, 7, 20).
- We further know that James was martyred not long after Jesus' ascension (cf. Acts 12:1-5) and before the book was written, and that Peter is clearly a different person from the beloved disciple based on them interacting with each other in 21:7.

Based on all of the above, the only disciple left who fulfils all of the internal indicators is John, the Son of Zebedee.

Other Biblical evidence provides a few other details about the person of John.

- He was a son of Zebedee and Salome, Mary's sister (cf. Mat. 4:21; 27:56; Mark 15:40).
- He was the Brother of James (cf. Mark 1:19-20).
- He was a fisherman (cf. Mark 1:19-20).
- He was from the region of Galilee (cf. Matt. 4:18).
- He was possibly a disciple of John the Baptist (cf. John 1:35).
- He is credited as the author of three epistles (1, 2, and 3 John) and the book of Revelation (cf. Rev 1:4).

2. Church Tradition

The final pieces of evidence that confirm the apostle John is the author come from the time of the early church fathers (also referred to as the Patristic era – *Patristic* from the Latin, *pater*, meaning *father*):

- Irenaeus (AD 120–202) wrote, “Afterwards, 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” (*Against Heresies*, 3.1.1).
- The Greek historian Eusebius (AD 260-339) gave credibility to Irenaeus’ claim when he wrote that Irenaeus’ authority was Polycarp (AD 70–155/160) who not only knew the apostle John, but was, in fact, one of his disciples (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, 4.14).
- Several other church fathers, namely Theophilus of Antioch (AD 115–188), Hippolytus (AD 170), Clement of Alexandria (AD 190), and Origen (AD 220), all agree in their various writings that John wrote the fourth Gospel.

WHEN DID JOHN LIVE AND WRITE?

External tradition strongly asserts that John led the church of Ephesus that Paul planted there and that he worked in the city for many years (cf. Eusebius *The Ecclesiastical History* 3. 24. 1). However, whether he wrote the book while there, or later during his exile on the Island of Patmos is unclear.

Modern liberal New Testament criticism claims that the gospel was not written by John, but by an anonymous Christian during the second century. However, the discovery of the Ryland fragment in Egypt in 1920 (also referred to as Papyrus P52) that contains portions of John 18 and has been dated to be from around AD 135, confirms that the book must have been written sometime in the first century while John was still alive.

Many commentators suggest that John wrote his gospel late in life, possibly between AD 85 and AD 90 while in exile on the Island of Patmos. They further argue that it was written after the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) as a supplement to them. However, there is compelling evidence within the book to suggest otherwise.

- Firstly John does not refer in any way to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Although this is not conclusive in itself, his description of Jewish customs and places seem to indicate that the temple and city were still standing and in operation at the time he wrote.
 - In 5:2, John wrote “Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called *Bethesda*, which has five roofed colonnades”. Note the tense of the underlined words – they are in the present tense. The Pool of Bethesda was destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans and was not uncovered until centuries later. If John wrote after AD 70, then surely he would have used the past tense, and not the present tense.
 - However, in 18:1, John wrote, “When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered”. Note the underlined word, it is in the past tense. The garden referred to here is the Garden of Gethsemane which is located outside the city walls and was ruined by the Romans sometime during the siege, but before they destroyed the city itself.

- Together, 5:2 and 18:1 suggest that John wrote sometime during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, but before the city was destroyed. This would date the book sometime in AD 68 or 69.
- Secondly, the content of the book is rather unique when compared to the other gospels. This suggests that John had not seen the content of Matthew, Mark, or Luke when he wrote (most scholars agree that Mark was written before Matthew and Luke, both of whom seem to rely heavily on the content of Mark).
- Finally, John refers to the twelve followers of Jesus as “disciples” rather than “apostles” – “apostles” being a later designation that is used in Matthew (cf. 10:2), Mark (cf. 3:14), and Luke (cf. 6:13).

Precise dating of the book is not necessary to appreciate its content, however, it does help to clear up some of the questions raised when comparing it to the other gospels.

WHY DID JOHN WRITE HIS GOSPEL?

The purpose of the Gospel of John is stated in 20:30-31, “*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 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 states in verse 30 that he has not recorded everything that Jesus did, but only those that are necessary to convince people of Jesus’ deity (cp. 21:25). What is important to understand here is that each gospel writer has a different reason for recording the life of Jesus. These reasons then determine the content of their writings. This is because biographic writing at the time was not concerned with recording events in a chronological order, but in a way that best served their purpose for writing. For example, Matthew wrote to show that Jesus is the King, therefore all the events and sayings recorded reflect that purpose. Similarly, Mark wrote to show Jesus as a servant, and Luke that Jesus was fully man. John, as we see in verse 30, wrote to show that Jesus is the Son of God. This is the most significant feature of John’s gospel, he is presenting a clear theology of Christ (Christology) that points to Jesus as Messiah and the Son of God.

What is significant in the Gospel of John is that he refers to the miracles as *signs* (v.30), rather than as miracles. A sign serves the purpose of pointing to something, or in this case, someone. In other words, the miracles are not meant to be an end in themselves, but rather are meant to point to something far greater. In this case, each sign demonstrates Jesus’ sovereign control over everything in this world that humanity is unable to control. When signs are manifested there are two possible reactions: acceptance or rejection. John uses these signs to point to Jesus and to show that He is the Son of God in an attempt to persuade the reader to acceptance and faith (v.31).

One thing to note here is that the word “*believe*” in verse 31 may originally have been in either the past or present tense – several manuscripts have been discovered that differ, some use the past tense, while others use the present tense. This difference changes the meaning slightly. If John originally wrote it in

the past tense, then he was writing to existing believers encouraging them to continue believing in Jesus as the Son of God. However, if he wrote it in the present tense, which is how it is generally understood today, it means that he was writing to non-believers so that they may come to believe, in other words this is an evangelistic book. Although the tense changes the meaning, it does not minimise the effect and overall message of the book. John's desire is clearly that his readers should be certain of who Jesus is, what He did, and that based on that they can stand firm in their belief, whether current or future.

WHERE DID THE EVENTS TAKE PLACE?

There are three major geographical divisions in John where Jesus' ministry occurred: Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. The majority of the work alternates between Galilee and Judea.

1. Galilee around Capernaum and Cana

- 1.1. Three blocks of text belong to this region: 2:1-12, 4:43-54, and 6:1 to 7:13.
- 1.2. Capernaum is located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and is the city that Jesus chose to make his base.
- 1.3. Cana is located about 8 km northeast of Nazareth.
- 1.4. In Galilee Jesus' popularity reaches its highest level, climaxing with the people's attempt to make Him king. It is also in Galilee where the final defection began.
- 1.5. John is the only gospel to refer to the Sea of Galilee as the Sea of Tiberias (6:1, 21:1).

2. Samaria

- 2.1. One block of text belongs to this region: 4:1-42.
- 2.2. Its sole content is the interview with the woman of Samaria.
- 2.3. The sojourn was not of long duration, for Jesus was merely passing through in route from Jerusalem to Galilee.

3. Jerusalem and Judea

- 3.1. In John, Jerusalem is more prominent than the cities of Galilee, and the atmosphere of the city is typically represented as being hostile to Jesus.
- 3.2. John records at least four visits to Jerusalem (cf. 2:13-3:21, 5:1-47, 7:14 to 10:39), including the visit during the Passion Week (12:2 to 20:29). If the two feasts mentioned in 7:14 and 10:22 are different visits to the city, then Jesus would have visited the city five times.
- 3.3. The largest block of text (12:12 to 20:29), concerns the events in Jerusalem during the two weeks before and after the crucifixion.

THE BOOK OF SEVENS

Most people are aware of the seven "I Am" sayings in the gospel, but did you know that there are five other groups of seven in the book? They are (1) the seven signs, (2) the seven sermons, (3) the seven resemblances to the Father, (4) the seven testimonies to the divinity of Christ, and (5) the seven titles for Jesus.

1. The Seven "I Am" Statements

- 1.1. *"I am the bread of life"* (6:35).
- 1.2. *"I am the light of the world"* (8:12).
- 1.3. *"I am the door of the sheep"* (10:7, 9).
- 1.4. *"I am the good shepherd"* (10:11, 14).
- 1.5. *"I am the resurrection and the life"* (11:25).
- 1.6. *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"* (14:6).
- 1.7. *"I am the true vine"* (15:1, 5).

2. The Seven Signs

- 2.1. Turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11).
- 2.2. Long-distance healing of the official's son in Capernaum (4:46-54).
- 2.3. Heals the lame man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (5:1-9).
- 2.4. Feeds the five thousand near the Sea of Galilee (6:1-14).
- 2.5. Walks on the water during the storm on the Sea of Galilee (6:16-21).
- 2.6. Heals the man born blind in Jerusalem (9:1-12, 41).
- 2.7. Raises Lazarus from the dead in Bethany (11:1-46).

3. The Seven Sermons

- 3.1. The New Birth (3:1-21).
- 3.2. The Water of Life (4:1-42).
- 3.3. Equality with The Father (5:19-47).
- 3.4. The Bread of Life (6:22-66).
- 3.5. The Life-Giving Spirit (7:1-52).
- 3.6. The Light of the Word (8:12-59).
- 3.7. The Good Shepherd (10:1-21).

4. The Seven Resemblances to the Father

- 4.1. Similar in Work (5:19).
- 4.2. Similar in Knowledge (5:20).
- 4.3. Similar in Power To Raise The Dead (5:21, 28, 29).
- 4.4. Similar in Judgement Authority (5:23).
- 4.5. Similar in Honour (5:23).
- 4.6. Similar in Power To Give Eternal Life (5:24).
- 4.7. Similar in Divine Self-Existence (5:25).

5. The Seven Testimonies to the Deity of Jesus

- 5.1. John the Baptist (1:7,27,36; 5:33,35,36).
- 5.2. The Father (5:34,37; 8:18).
- 5.3. Works (5:36; 10:25, 38; 15:24, 25; 14:11).
- 5.4. The Scriptures (5:39-46).
- 5.5. Jesus' Own Testimony (8:14,18,37; 5:31).

- 5.6. The Holy Spirit (15:26; 16:13,14).
- 5.7. The Disciples (15:27; 19:35).

6. The Seven Titles of Christ

- 6.1. Son of God (1:34).
- 6.2. Son of Man (1:51).
- 6.3. Christ/Messiah (4:25).
- 6.4. Saviour (4:42).
- 6.5. Teacher (13:13-14).
- 6.6. Master (17:13).
- 6.7. Lord (20:28).

What is important to bear in mind with the first two groups of seven (i.e. the seven “*I Am*” statements and the seven signs) is that they appeal to the different worldviews of the people involved and the original readers. The Greeks focussed on words and took what people said at face value. Therefore, when Jesus made a statement about Himself, such as “*I am the resurrection and the life*” (John 11:25), they did not doubt it and simply accepted it. If they did question it, Jesus would simply have to defend Himself through reason and rhetoric. However, for the Jews, words were not enough – they had to be backed up with actions. Therefore, in John 11, Jesus being the resurrection and the life is displayed by Him raising Lazarus from the dead. This miracle serves as a sign pointing to and confirming His words. Note 1 Corinthians 1:22 where Paul further confirms this difference: “*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom*”.

OUTLINE/STRUCTURE OF THE GOSPEL

The following outline has been adapted from D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (pp105-108).

- I. **Prologue** (1:1-18)
- II. **Jesus’ Self-Disclosure in Word and Deed** (1:19-10:42)
 - i. Prelude to Jesus’ Public Ministry (1:19-51)
 - ii. Early Ministry: Signs, Works, and Words (2:1-4:54)
 - iii. Rising Opposition: More Signs, Works, and Words (5:1-7:52)
 - iv. Excursus: The Woman Caught in Adultery (7:53-8:11)
 - v. Radical Confrontation: Climactic Signs, Works, and Words (8:10-10:42)
- III. **Transition: Life and Death, King and Suffering Servant** (11:1-12:50)
 - i. The Death and Resurrection of Lazarus (11:1-44)
 - ii. The Judicial Decision to Kill Jesus (11:45-54)
 - iii. Triumph and Impending Death (11:55-12:36)
 - iv. Theology of Unbelief (12:37-50)
- IV. **Jesus’ Self-Disclosure in His Cross and Exaltation** (13:1-20:31)
 - i. The Last Supper (13:1-30)

- ii. The Farewell Discourse (13:31-16:33)
 - iii. The High Priestly Prayer (17:1-26)
 - iv. The Trial and Passion of Jesus (18:1-19:42)
 - v. The Resurrection of Jesus (20:1-29)
 - vi. John's Purpose for Writing (20:30-31)
- V. **Epilogue** (21:1-25)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Read the book of John. What themes stand out to you? What words seem to be repeated regularly through the book? How do these themes and words influence your understanding of the whole book?
2. Why do you think it is important for the understanding of a Bible book to know who the author is, where he lived, etc.?
3. Read John 20:30-31 and 21:25. How can these verses help us understand the differences between the content of the four gospels and the rest of biblical history?
4. Some say that only the teachings (i.e. "ideas") of the Bible are important, but not its historicity. Evaluate such a suggestion. How important is the factor of history and historicity in the Bible? See John 1:14 and 1 John 1.
5. John presents a challenging call to believe in Jesus as Christ and as the Son of God. What did John mean when he said by believing you may have life in His name? Is it mere intellectual assent or does it involve more?