

The Gospel of John

New book, new format! We'll see if it sticks!

The Author

While he never identifies himself by name, the author of the Gospel of John is most assuredly the Apostle John, the same author of First, Second, and Third John, as well as Revelation. Two lines of evidence lead us to this conclusion.

- First, while he doesn't identify himself by name, he does refer to himself as a *disciple* (21:24), which makes sense considering the level of detail with which he writes, especially in scenarios in which only the disciples were around (e.g., the Upper Room). Even more specifically, he refers to himself as the *disciple whom Jesus loved* (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:20). We know this disciple was one who *leaned on [Jesus'] breast at the supper* (21:20, cf. 13:23). Jesus' innermost circle of three disciples was comprised of Peter, James, and John. There are some passages that have Peter at the same place as the *disciple whom Jesus loved*, most notably on the resurrection morning (20:1-8), so this disciple couldn't be Peter. Neither could it be James, as he died early on (Acts 12:2; cf. John 21:23). John fits the bill perfectly.¹
- Second, the early church fathers bear witness to the Apostle John. For instance, Irenaeus (AD 120-202) attributes authorship to John.² Irenaeus is especially significant, considering he was a disciple of Polycarp, who himself was a disciple of John. If anyone would be able to accurately identify the author, it would be John's spiritual grandson!

The Place and Date of Writing

Thus, the Gospel of John was likely written around 85 AD from the city of Ephesus. In 21:23, John addresses a rumor going around that he himself *would not die*. This indicates that the other apostles have already started to die off. We also know that John became a leader in the church at Ephesus in his later years, and it was there that John wrote the Gospel, again testified by Irenaeus. In that Gentile setting, John's explanations of the Jewish feasts and other matters make a lot of sense!

The Theme

If the theme of John could be summed up in one word, it would most assuredly be the word *believe*. This is perfectly encapsulated in John's own purpose statement found in 20:30-31.

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

The Greek verb for *believe* (*pisteuō*) occurs a total of 246 times in the New Testament, and one hundred of those occurrences (41% of them) are in the Gospel of John.³ This word means "to consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one's trust." John wrote this Gospel so that his readers might consider it true that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name*.

¹For a more in-depth treatment, consider Carson and Moo, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 236-246.

²"Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect... Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. 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." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

³It also occurs 37x in Acts; 21x in Romans; 15x in Mark; 11x in Matthew; 10x in 1 John; 9x in Luke and 1 Corinthians; 5x in 1 Thessalonians; 4x in Galatians, 2 Thessalonians, and 1 Peter; 3x in 1 Timothy and James; 2x in 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, and Hebrews; and 1x in Philippians, 2 Timothy, and Jude.

As we work our way through John, we ought to keep this purpose in mind. The one and only way to be made right with God, the only way to have eternal life, is to consider Jesus – who He is and what He did – to be worthy of our trust. As Edward Mote wrote in one of my favorite hymns, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.” What is our hope for eternal life? What are we banking on to have a friendship with God, and to have His wrath removed from us? The Apostle John wrote his Gospel so that our answer would be Jesus, and Jesus alone! Everything he wrote leads us to that goal.

It's also worth noting what's absent. John doesn't use any other word to describe what is necessary for eternal life. While we can keep in mind that words and phrases like *have faith* and *trust* are synonyms for *believe*, when we present the Gospel to others, let us not make it more complicated or confusing than it needs to be! The Word of God never speaks of praying a prayer or altar calls. I'd argue that even bringing up repentance muddies the water too much!⁴ If the Apostle John finds it sufficient to only talk about believing, then so should we!

John and the Other Gospels

The Gospel of John stands apart from the other Gospels in significant ways. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are collectively labeled the “Synoptic Gospels,” because they view Jesus’ life and ministry in similar ways.⁵ It's estimated that only a little over half of Matthew’s Gospel is unique and not found in the other three Gospels. Luke has about 60% unique material; Mark only 7%. In other words, 93% of what we read in Mark is found in the other three Gospels! In stark contrast, over 90% of the Gospel of John contains teaching and actions not found in the other three Gospels! Robert Gundry writes a helpful summary:

“The Synoptics emphasize the Galilean ministry of Jesus, his parables, and the theme of God’s kingdom. John emphasizes Jesus’ Judean ministry, omits the parables and – for the most part – the kingdom, and substitutes long discourse and the theme of eternal life.”⁶

It's an important point! Matthew, Mark, and Luke talk about life in the Kingdom of God; John tells us how to get into the Kingdom of God. Hence the emphasis on believing!

A Brief Outline

I. Prologue (1:1-18)

II. Jesus Reveals Himself to the World (1:19-12:50)

This is the section in which Jesus performs seven miracles, as well as gives His “evangelistic” teachings.

III. Jesus Reveals Himself to the Disciples (13:1-17:26)

This is the section in which Jesus speaks to His disciples concerning how they ought to abide in Him and love one another.

IV. The Passion Week (18:1-20:31)

V. Epilogue (21:1-25)

⁴I recognize this is a hot button issue for some. There are four words – two nouns and two verbs – that are translated as *repentance* in the New Testament, but they don't always mean *repentance* in the way we usually think of it in terms of eternal life. They are also used of the physical act of turning one's body away from something. These four Greek words occur a total of 114 times in the New Testament, fifty-eight of which are throughout all four Gospels. They occur five times in the Gospel of John (1:38; 12:40; 20:14, 16; 21:20). Four of them indicate the physical act of turning; 12:40 is a quotation from Isaiah 6:10. In this light, I'd argue it's best to see repentance as a changing of one's mind from trying to fix one's own sin problem, to believing that Jesus fixed it for them!

⁵You can see the word *optic* in *Synoptic*. They have similar views.

⁶Robert Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 258.