

The Gospel according to Saint John

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Part 1

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Introduction

Authorship

The fourth (or first?) gospel was written in Ephesus (in present-day Turkey) during the late first century (c. 85-90 AD).

According to tradition, the author of this book was St. John, one of the original twelve apostles (Mt 10:1-15). Many modern scholars, however, believe that the text was put into its present written form not by John himself but by one of his close and trusted disciples. Whether he penned the book himself or dictated it to an amanuensis, there is little doubt that the fourth gospel contains the recollections of John the apostle concerning the ministry of Christ – that it is, indeed, the "Gospel according to St. John."

John had been one of Jesus' closest friends (see Mt 12:1-9, 26:36-46; Jn 13:23-25, 19:25-27), and he was one of the chief pillars of the early Church (see Ga 2:9-10). In his later years (c. 85-100 AD), John served as the bishop of Asia Minor, with his central residence in the city of Ephesus. Urged on by his friends and disciples, the aged apostle composed (or dictated) his version of the gospel. In addition to his gospel, the New Testament contains four other documents that have been attributed to John: three of his letters (1, 2, and 3 John) which were written c. 90 AD; and the book of Revelation (or the Apocalypse), written c. 95 AD. St. John the Apostle was almost one hundred years old when he died (c. 95-100 AD).

Differences between John and the synoptic gospels

In the synoptics but not in John

John does not tell of the birth, childhood, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, or ascension of Christ.

Instead of cataloging the many miracles performed by the Lord, as do the synoptic writers, he recounts only seven of those works.

The synoptics contain compilations of Christ's sermons, parables, stories, and short sayings; but in the Gospel of John, the teachings of the Lord are presented almost exclusively in the form of long and rather complicated theological discourses (see Jn 3, 4, 5, 6, 7-8, 10 and 14-16).

It has further been pointed out by many scholars that the language and thought-forms employed by John are more mystical and philosophical than those of the synoptics.

In John but not in the synoptics

While he omits a good deal of the material contained in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John also tells us much that is not mentioned by them.

John are Christ's first miracle at the marriage feast at Cana in Galilee (2:1-11).

The dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus (3:1-21).

Jesus's revelation of himself as the Messiah to the Samaritan woman (4:1-42).

Jesus's raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-57).

Jesus's washing the feet of the apostles at the last supper (13:1-20).

Contrast between John and the synoptics on the chronological and geographical scope of Christ's public ministry

The synoptic gospels concentrate exclusively upon the Lord's Galilean ministry and his final journey through Judea to Jerusalem, giving the impression that Christ's public ministry was quite brief, only one year in duration.

John tells us that, during the public ministry, there were at least three Passover festivals (2:13, 6:4, 12:1), and that during that approximately three-year period Jesus worked extensively in Judea as well as in Galilee.

His final sojourn in Judea, moreover, lasted a number of months; and he made more than one visit to Jerusalem during that time (7:1-12:11).

Some differences easily explained

The Gospel of John was written between ten and twenty-five years later than the synoptic gospels. John presupposes that his readers are familiar with the tradition represented by Matthew, Mark, and Luke and that there is, by and large, no need to cover the ground already covered by those earlier writers.

John seeks to supplement the synoptic tradition both historically and theologically. That is, he provides us with much information concerning phases of Christ's public ministry not recorded in the synoptics, and he emphasizes the deity of the Lord more starkly and more vividly.

His predominant theological aim is to explain "the mystery of the person of Jesus," to proclaim "the eternal origin and divine nature of this Man who was more than man."

This theological purpose is the determining factor in John's selection of only seven of the miracles performed by Christ and in his presentation of the Lord's teachings in discourse form.

The seven miracles are depicted as "signs" of Christ's full deity, and the discourses are intended to make it clear that Jesus the man was also God the Son.

The mystical and philosophical character of the fourth gospel was apparently derived from the esoteric Judaism of the Hellenistic age, a tradition rooted in the wisdom literature of the OT and very well suited to John's theological intentions.

Because of the theological character of his work, the fathers of the Church spoke of the author of the fourth gospel as "St. John the Theologian."

Differences on several matters of historical fact

John places Christ's cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of the public ministry (Jn 2:13-25), while the synoptics describe this event as taking place during the last week of the Lord's earthly life (Mt 21:12-17; Mk 11:15-19; Lk 19:45-48).

The synoptics tell us that the anointing of Christ by a woman of Bethany took place after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9) but, according to John, it occurred prior to the triumphal entry, and the "woman of Bethany" was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Jn 12:1-11).

The synoptics date the crucifixion of Jesus on the day of the Passover, while John dates it on the day before Passover; according to John, "the Passover in the year in which Jesus was crucified [c. 30 AD] fell on a Saturday and not on a Friday." Thus, while the four gospels agree "that the Last Supper took place on Thursday evening and the crucifixion on the following Friday . . . they disagree as to whether or not the Last Supper was a Passover meal."

These factual discrepancies are difficult to resolve

Some have suggested that Jesus drove the money-changers from the Jerusalem Temple on more than one occasion; but it is more likely that John deliberately took the cleansing of the Temple out of historical context in order to make a theological point: "He may have chosen the cleansing of the Temple as a major symbolic act, indicating that the life of Jesus was in danger from the start, that the shadow of the cross lay over His whole ministry." Furthermore, Jesus here "revealed Who He was, and this in turn led to His death. He claimed divine prerogatives for Himself. He came to His own home as the Lord of the Temple, but His own rejected Him."

It is also likely that John chose to place the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany, which was a foreshadowing of Christ's death, prior to the triumphal entry in order to stress the significance of the Lord's final visit to Jerusalem.

On the question of whether the last supper was a Passover meal or not, most contemporary biblical scholars agree with John rather than with the synoptic gospels. However, this should not lead us to conclude that the synoptic gospels are entirely wrong on this matter, for although the last supper was held a day earlier than the Jewish Passover, it was the paschal rite for Jesus and the apostles, "and during it the new rite, the Eucharist, was instituted."

Summary on the differences between John and the synoptics

While there are differences, and even a few factual discrepancies, between John and the synoptics, these differences and discrepancies are by no means fundamental contradictions. The synoptic gospels, drawing from common sources in the early apostolic tradition, represent one dimension of the early Church's understanding of who Jesus was, what he said, and what he did. The fourth gospel, drawing mainly from the mind and memory of the apostle John, represents another and more deeply theological perspective on the person and work of Christ. John's

gospel supplements and completes the synoptic account of Christ's earthly life and is thus "the key to the proper understanding of the synoptic gospels."

Two main parts of John's Gospel: (1) Jn 1-11 on the divine sonship of Jesus Christ; (2) Jn 12-21 on the Passion and Resurrection of Christ.

John 1:1-18 – The Incarnation of the Word (Logos) of God

The pre-existence and incarnation of the divine Logos

The major purpose of John 1-11 is to define the identity of Jesus of Nazareth – to proclaim that Jesus was both the Messiah of Israel and the incarnation of God the Son. In accordance with his purpose, John begins his gospel with his well-known "Prologue" (1:1-18):

~**The Deity of Jesus Christ** [1:1] In the beginning was the Word (Logos), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [1:2] He was in the beginning with God. [1:3] All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. [1:4] In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. [1:5] And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

~**The Witness John the Baptist** [1:6] There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. [1:7] This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. [1:8] He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. [1:9] That was the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world. [1:10] He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. [1:11] He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. [1:12] But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: [1:13] who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

~**The Word Made Flesh** [1:14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. [1:15] John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.' [1:16] And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. [1:17] For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. [1:18] No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

The "Word" of God (JN 1:1-4)

The Gospel of John, like the other books of the New Testament, was written in Greek. And the English term "Word" is a translation of *Logos*, a Greek expression signifying "wisdom" (or "reason") as well as "Word." In presenting Jesus as the incarnation (or "enfleshment") of the divine Logos, John is telling us that the Wisdom and Word of God has entered into union with human nature.

The OT roots of John's Logos-theology

In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, the principle of wisdom is often personified and spoken of as a manifestation of God which has been with God from all eternity (see Pr 8:22-36; Ws 7:22-8:1).

The Old Testament prophets thought of the Word of God as in some sense the presence of the Lord himself, a revelation of the very being of God.

The Old Testament also teaches that the cosmos was created by the power of God's Word and Wisdom (see Gn 1 and Ps 33:6, 9).

John speaks of the creative Wisdom and Word of God as a distinct person within the divine nature, as "the only Son from the Father" (1:14). In the incarnation, the eternal and pre-existent Logos, being himself divine and of one essence with God the Father, "nevertheless condescended to assume human nature for the purpose of man's redemption and restoration."

The life and light of God (Jn 1:4-18)

As the divine Word incarnate, Christ is also the source of life and enlightenment (Jn 1:4). Through the "true light" of the incarnate Lord, the darkness of spiritual blindness and of evil can be overcome (Jn 1:5, 9).

To be delivered from spiritual darkness – to enter into the grace, truth, and eternal life of the divine Logos, to be reconciled with God – we must receive Christ into our hearts and believe in him.

Speaking to those Jews of his time who believed that to be a physical descendant of Abraham was to be a child of God, John asserts that divine sonship is not dependent upon ethnic identity but upon faith in Jesus (1:12-14). Christ alone, the Word made flesh, makes God the Father known to us (1:18); and only through faith in Christ may we receive "power to become children of God" (1:12). We are not born into the family of God by being born into a Jewish family – or into a Christian family, for that matter. We are not saved by "the faith of our fathers," but by our own faith.

John against the Gnostics

John's sacramental theology – a spiritual materialism

Throughout the Gospel of John, there is an insistent emphasis upon what might be called the physical or material dimension of God's work of salvation. Salvation is not deliverance from, but deliverance in and through, the material world. The true deity of God the Son is embodied in the true humanity of Jesus Christ. In Christ, the Word "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14); and in him, the spiritual glory of God has been made visible (1:14, 18).

The public ministry of Christ was itself a physically real manifestation of the spiritual power of God.

The discourses recorded by John were spoken by Jesus; they were physically audible and full of references to such material realities as water, bread, light, darkness, the human body, flesh, and blood.

The miracles of Christ described in the fourth gospel are also physical acts filled with spiritual significance: water is transformed into wine (2:1-11); bodily infirmities are healed (4:43-54, 5:1-9, 9:1-41); the hungry are miraculously fed (6:1-14); Jesus walks upon the sea (6:15-21); and Lazarus is literally raised from the dead (11:1-57).

The teachings and miracles of the Lord were presented and performed in specific places at specific times in the region of ancient Palestine.

It was the genuinely human and fully divine Christ who suffered and died upon the cross and who was resurrected bodily from the dead; and it is

through his broken body and shed blood that mankind may be delivered from the powers of sin and death.

John's theology is a "sacramental" theology.

A sacrament, in the broad sense, is a "visible means of grace," an event or act in the world which makes the grace of God present and available to humankind. *Sacramentum* is a Latin word meaning "pledge." A sacrament, in this sense, is a "pledge of salvation" made by God to all who live in a spirit of faith and obedience.

In Orthodox theology, the sacraments are called "mysteries" (from the Greek, *mysterion*) to emphasize the mystical and supernatural significance of the saving acts of God. Writing late in the 1st century AD, at a time when the liturgical life of the Church had reached a rather high level of development, John stresses the mysterious but very real and physical presence and activity of God in the world, the ultimate sacrament, linking the saving work of Christ to the sacramental works of the Church (baptism, chrismation, the Eucharist, and so on).

The salvation of God was made "really present" in Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit that salvation remains "really present" in the Church, the sacramental and mystical body of Christ.

John's anti-Gnostic purpose

John's purpose in emphasizing so strongly the material, incarnational, and sacramental dimensions of God's redemptive work was to counteract a heresy known as *Gnosticism*.

Gnosticism was a religious and philosophical perspective derived from the mystery religions of Greece, Persia, and Egypt. Before and during the time of Christ, certain sects within Judaism had adopted the Gnostic view of the world; and later, as the Christian movement spread from Palestine throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East, many Christians came to be influenced by Gnosticism.

The basic elements of Gnosticism (whether pagan, Jewish or "Christian")

Salvation from suffering and death depends upon the acquisition of certain secret (esoteric, occult) "knowledge" (from the Greek *gnosis*: "knowledge" or "wisdom"). To be saved, one must overcome one's spiritual ignorance and delusions by learning the "truth" about reality.

Spirit-matter dualism: The "truth," according to the Gnostics, is that spirit, which is essentially good, and matter, which is essentially evil, are absolutely opposed to one another.

In the beginning, spirit (the realm of God) and matter (the realm of darkness and chaos) were absolutely separate and unmixed. From God, there emerged a multitude of angels (or "aeons"), and some of these angels became hostile to God. It was the leader of these rebellious angels (the devil) who, in opposition to God's will, created the space-time world in which spirit and matter are mingled.

The human race is a product of this unholy union of spirit and matter and can be delivered from the corruption of the physical world only through the absolute negation of the flesh.

Through the special wisdom of Gnosticism, which had been sent by God through a series of good angels, spiritual illumination and liberation from the material order are possible.

Jewish and Christian Gnostics maintained that "the God of the Old Testament" was actually the devil; for the true God would not have anything to do with the realm of matter, darkness, and evil. The Christian Gnostics thought of Jesus as one of God's good angels, who had taken on the form or appearance (but not the real nature and body) of a man in order to reveal the "secret knowledge" which leads to deliverance from the world. For the Gnostics, Jesus was not genuinely human, nor was he fully divine; he was not actually "born of woman," nor did he live, suffer, and die in the flesh; and he was resurrected not "in the body" but in spirit only.

Such were the teachings of Gnosticism, which threatened the Orthodoxy of the Church during the first three centuries of her historic life. John wrote his gospel in deliberate opposition to the heresies of the Gnostics. He saw that Gnosticism required the rejection of the doctrines of God's creation of the world; the union of God and man in the Incarnation; the bodily life, death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ; the general resurrection of the dead at the end of days; and the inherent goodness of the material universe.

Against "the Gnostic gospel," John asserts:

The Logos "became flesh" in Jesus Christ (1:14).

In and through the divine Logos, God made "all things" (1:3).

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (3:16).

In opposition to the hyper-spiritualism of the Gnostics, John gives his apostolic certification to the Orthodox doctrine of the creator-God who is continually present and active in the world which he has created.