

John – An In-Depth Study

[Part 1]

The author of this gospel was John the son of Zebedee and brother of James, the disciple who had a specially close relationship with Jesus Christ. [John 13:23; John 19:26]

Written by John after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and before John's exile to the island of Pathos, written mainly to new Christians and non-Jewish people seeking to understand Christianity.

Purpose of this gospel is to prove conclusively that Jesus is the Son of God and that all who believe in Him will receive the gift of eternal life. [John 20:30-31]

Over 90% of what we read in John's gospel is unique.

John does omit much of what we find in the other three gospel accounts because of the people he aimed to reach with Christianity, non-Jewish people.

Christianity had to be re-stated for this new audience.

For example, a Greek when they heard or read the gospel according to Matthew would be confronted with a long genealogy. Genealogies were familiar enough to a Jew, but quite unintelligible to a Greek.

Who was this King David or the Messiah?

A Greek would ask 'Do I have to know Jewish history to become a Christian?'

The Greeks had two great conceptions.

1) The word 'logos' which had two meanings in Greek, the spoken word and also reason –

A Greek looked at the splendid dependable order of the creation and unhesitatingly saw the reasoning mind of God, who is responsible for this majestic order.

The Greek understood what gives humans the power to think and plan was the logos of God dwelling within human beings. [Job 32:8]

This is why the apostle John seized on to this thinking to introduce Jesus Christ to the gentile mind of a Greek person.

What John was saying was "*All your life you have been fascinated by the great guiding, controlling mind of the Creator God. This mind has come to earth in the man Jesus Christ.*"

2) The gentile Greeks had the concept of two worlds –

The wonderful world in which we live that was but a world of shadows, copies and unrealities.

The other world was the real eternal world, the unseen but real.

John introduced Jesus Christ as the reality come to this world.

The Greek word for reality is "*alēthinos*" which is closely connected with the word "*alēthēs*" which means truth. [John 1:9; John 6:32; John 15:1; John 8:16]

John talks about Jesus Christ's miracles as signs [Greek "*sēmeia*"] which the Greek would then see them as windows that opened on the reality that was God.

John underlines the deity of Jesus in every title he gives Him.

For example Lamb of God, Son of God, the Life, and the often-used term “*I am*” which is the title given to the One God.

John pointed to the spiritual meaning of the words and events in Jesus’ life, in a way that the other three gospels did **not** attempt.

John’s gospel was **not** historical, but spiritual in aim and context.

There was at the time of the writing of John’s gospel two heresies confronting the Church.

a) Some Jewish Christians were giving John the Baptist too high a place.

There is evidence of one fringe group within the Church who had never progressed beyond the baptism of John the Baptist. [Acts 19:1-7]

John, over and over again, quietly but definitely, relegates John the Baptist to his proper place.

b) The heresy of Gnosticism.

Simply stated the basic doctrine of Gnosticism was that matter was essential evil and spirit was essentially good.

The outcome of such thoughts was –

Since God is spirit He could **not** touch matter, so God could **not** have created the world.

They looked on Jesus as one of the emanations which had proceeded from God.

A kind of demi-God distant from the real God part of a chain of lesser beings between God and the human world, so Jesus had **no** real body, a phantom without real flesh and blood.

Other Gnostics consider that Jesus was a man into whom the Spirit of God only came at His baptism and left Him before He died on the cross, because the Spirit of God could never suffer and die.

The fact that John in his gospel sets out to correct both of these heresies explains why he emphasises the humanity and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

I have stated that the author of the fourth gospel is John the disciple of Jesus Christ, which is true.

But John’s gospel is far more than the writing of one man, it includes the revelation of the Holy Spirit over the seventy years after the death of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

John 16:12-15 [NIV] *“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.”*

What we see again and again in John’s writings is what Jesus meant by what He is recorded as saying.

This was the indication of the work of the Holy Spirit, so this gives even greater importance to this gospel account.

John’s gospel is really the gospel according to the Holy Spirit.

It so happens that the early Church has a whole series of accounts of how the fourth gospel came to be written.

Irenaeus a pupil of Polycarp who was in turn a pupil of John.

Wrote as the then Bishop of Lyons about AD 177 – “*John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leant upon His breast, himself also published [Greek “exedōke”] the gospel in Ephesus, when he was living in Asia.*”

The word Irenaeus uses makes John’s gospel sound like a public issue of some almost official document.

Clement of Alexandria about AD 230, writes – “*Last of all, John perceiving that the bodily facts had been made plain in the gospel, being urged by his friends, composed a spiritual gospel.*”

The important thing here is the phrase “*being urged by his friends.*”

It begins to become clear that the fourth gospel is far more than one man’s personal production, that there is a group, the Church, behind its production.

The tenth century manuscript called Codex Toletanus which prefaces the New Testament books with short descriptions, prefaced the fourth gospel with –

“*The apostle John, whom the Lord loved most, last of all wrote this gospel, at the request of the Bishops of Asia, against Cerinthus and other heretics.*”

Another very important document known as the **Muratorian Canon**, is the first list of New Testament books that the Church ever issued.

Compiled in Rome about AD 170 it gives short accounts of the origin, nature and contents of each of the New Testament books.

The fourth gospel account is as follows – “*At the request of his fellow disciples and of his bishops, John, one of the disciples, said, ‘fast with me for three days from this time and whatsoever shall be revealed to each of us, whether it be favourable to my writing or not, let us relate it to one another.’ On the same night it was revealed to Andrew that John should relate all things, aided by the revision of all.*”

It is obvious that we cannot accept all that statement, because it is **not** possible for the apostle Andrew to be in Ephesus in AD 100. But the point is that here it is stated as clearly as possible that the fourth gospel is the product of the mind and memory of John but the end product of a group of Holy Spirit inspired people.

Church writers tell us that there were two Johns in Ephesus at the same time.

John the apostle and John the elder.

Second letter from John starts ... “*The elder ...*”

Third letter from John starts ... “*The elder ...*”

Here we have our solution. The actual penman of the letters was John the elder, the mind and memory behind them was the aged John and apostle, the master whom John the elder always thought of and described as “*the disciple whom Jesus loved.*”

Behind the fourth gospel there is the whole church at Ephesus, the whole company of the saints and apostles, the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ Himself.

Keep this in mind as we study this vital gospel account.