

BIBLE OVERVIEW - NEW TESTAMENT 2

The Fourth Gospel

John's Gospel is very different from the other three and was almost certainly written later. John probably knew the first three Gospels, and set out to present an account of Jesus which is much more reflective. Matthew, Mark and Luke like a series of photographs, while John is more like an artist's portrait. 'The other Gospel writers focussed on events, following Jesus through the bustling market places and villages. Unlike them, John assumed readers knew the basic facts about Jesus. Instead of focusing on facts, he mulled over the profound meaning of what Jesus had said and done.' (*NIV Insight Bible*).

While Matthew, Mark and Luke focus on Jesus' public teaching and miracle working in Galilee, John contains information about Jesus' early work in Judea.

John organised his account around seven miracles which he regards as 'signs' of who Jesus is. He selected seven sign miracles probably because in his culture the number seven stood for something that is perfect or complete.

John's Gospel presents the seven miracles like a diamond refracting seven bands of colour... John's point is that Jesus is perfect and complete. His miracles show his true colours – he is the Messiah that Israel has been looking for, for he alone offers eternal life. This way of presenting things may seem strange to modern readers. But the Gospel of John, though probably the last Gospel to be written, was Christianity's first statement of the message of Jesus made in a way that would relate to the thought forms of its day. It is composed with more care and artistry than any prize-winning narrative or award-winning film. (*Word in Life Bible*)

Apart from the parable of the shepherd (10.1-6), John does not report parables of Jesus. Instead he focuses on his numerous encounters with individuals and his extensive dialogue with the crowds that came to hear him. Like the other evangelists, John devotes a large proportion (in his case one-third) of his account to events that occurred during the week preceding Jesus' death. But in another sense he is highly selective:

John selected vignettes from no more than 20 days in Jesus' life, and arranged them so that present a Messiah who knows 'where I came from and where I am going' (8.14). (*NIV Insight Bible*).

Jesus' seven 'I am' sayings

- The bread of life (6.35)
- The light of the world (8.12; 9.5)
- The gate for the sheep (10.7,9)
- The good shepherd (10.11,14)
- The resurrection and the life (11.25)
- The way, the truth and the life (14.6)
- The vine (15.1,5)

Outline of Contents

1.1-18	<i>Prologue</i>	
1.19-51	<i>Beginning of Jesus' ministry</i> John the Baptist (1.19-34) The first disciples of Jesus (1.35-51)	
2.1-12.19	<i>Jesus' public ministry</i> In Cana (2.1-2) In Jerusalem (2.13-3.36) In Samaria (4.1-42) In Galilee (4.43-54) In Jerusalem (5.1-47) In Galilee (6.1-7.9) In Jerusalem (7.10-10.42) In Bethany (11.1-12.11)	<p>First sign: Water to wine</p> <p><i>Festival of Passover</i> (2.13,23)</p> <p>Cleansing of temple</p> <p>Nicodemus: New birth by believing</p> <p>Samaritan woman: Life-giving water</p> <p>Second sign: Healing of a sick boy</p> <p><i>A religious festival</i> (5.1)</p> <p>Third sign: Healing of a cripple</p> <p>Dialogue: Jesus – God's Son and equal</p> <p><i>Festival of Passover</i> (6.4)</p> <p>Fourth sign: Feeding of five thousand</p> <p>Fifth sign: Jesus walking on the water</p> <p>Dialogue: Jesus the bread of life</p> <p><i>Festival of Tabernacles/Shelters</i> (7.2)</p> <p>Dialogue: God sent me (7.10-36)</p> <p>Dialogue: Jesus promises the Spirit (7.37-52)</p> <p>Dialogue: Jesus Light of the world (8.12-30)</p> <p>Dialogue: The truth will set you free (8.31-59)</p> <p>Sixth sign: Jesus heals a man born blind (9.1-41)</p> <p>Discourse: Jesus the good shepherd (10.1-21)</p> <p><i>Festival of Dedication</i> (10.22)</p> <p>Dialogue: 'Messiah' & 'Son of God' (10.22-42)</p> <p>Seventh sign: Raising of Lazarus (11.1-54)</p> <p><i>Festival of Passover</i> (11.55; 12.1; 13.1,29)</p> <p>Jesus is anointed (11.55-12.11)</p> <p>The triumphant entry into Jerusalem (12.12-19)</p>
12.20-17.26	<i>The last week in Jerusalem</i>	<p>Some Greeks seek Jesus (12.20-36)</p> <p>The evangelist reflects (12.37-43)</p> <p>Jesus' words will judge (12.44-50)</p> <p>The foot washing (13.1-30)</p> <p>The farewell discourses (13.31-16.33)</p> <p>Jesus' prayer of consecration (17.1-26)</p> <p>Arrest, trial, crucifixion & burial (18.1-19.42)</p>
20.1-31	<i>The resurrection and appearances of the Lord</i>	
21.1-25	<i>Epilogue: Another appearance in Galilee</i>	

Individuals who encounter Christ in John's Gospel

- Andrew (1.40)
- Nathanael (1.46)
- Nicodemus (3.1-21)
- A Samaritan woman (4.5-29)
- A man born blind (9.1-41)
- Mary of Bethany (11.1-2; 12.1-7)
- Lazarus (11.1-44)
- Judas (13.21-30)
- The women around Jesus (19.25)
- Thomas (20.24-29)

Who is the author of John's Gospel?

No title page! It was 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' is the 'the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down.' (21.20,24). Early church fathers presumed this was John the son of Zebedee. He may have had a scribe. 'We know that his testimony is true' suggests 21.24-25 is a footnote added by John's contemporaries. Place of writing – probably Ephesus. Date – probably in the 80s or 90s.

Purpose of the Gospel

'But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you have life in his name.' (20.31).

The verb *believe* reflects the Greek aorist tense, signifying a decisive act of believing: 'that you may [come to] believe' – i.e. John's purpose is evangelistic. But some manuscripts have the present tense: 'these are written that those who believe may go on believing' – John's purpose is Christian nurture. The contents of the Gospel suggest it sets out to fulfil both objectives. John is both proactive and reactive.

1. To win unbelievers

Focus in the Prologue on Jesus as the eternal Word of God.

A restatement of the gospel for people with a Hellenistic background. 'By A.D. 60 there must have been a hundred thousand Greeks in the Church for every Jew who was a Christian.' (W. Barclay, *Gospel of John*, Vol 1, p. xviii).

In presenting Jesus as the eternal Word of God, John develops a concept that made sense in the worlds of both Greeks and Jews.

- In *Hebrew thought*, a word was more than a sound; it was active, it did things. This especially true of the Word of God, e.g. God created the world by his word. God's Word runs swiftly (Ps. 147.15); it accomplishes God's purpose for it (Isaiah 55.11). Later when Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the spoken language of the Jews, the *Targums* translated 'God' by 'Word of God'. E.g. 'Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God' (Ex. 19.17) became 'Moses led the people out of the camp to meet the Word of God'.
- In *Greek thought* the idea of the Word (or *logos*) was central. The principle that controls and orders of the natural order which otherwise would be subject to chance and flux. The principle of order which enables the universe to continue to exist. Probably originated in the thinking of Heraclitus, a philosopher in Ephesus around 560 BC.

John sought to contextualise the gospel in Hellenistic culture. Cf the task of mission today.

2. To nurture disciples

In the face of two heresies that infiltrated the church in late 1st and early 2nd centuries.

- The *Ebionite* heresy. Cerinthus, who had a strong following in Asia Minor in late 1st century, taught that the Son of God had no existence prior to his birth from Mary. A divine Spirit descended on him for a period and then left him. Jesus one of many demi-gods. Polytheistic. Cf. stress on pre-existence of Christ in John 1.1-18 and on his deity throughout the gospel: his pre-existence (1.1-5; 6.33-38; 8.58; 17.5); his omniscience (4.16-17; 5.6; 6.6; 6.61-64; 11.14); his equality with God (5.19-47).
- The *Docetic* heresy. All material is evil, therefore the humanity of Jesus was only apparent. A phantom under which God revealed himself to humans. Docetic comes from Gk. *dokei* meaning 'it seems'. In the *Acts of John* (a docetic writing) Jesus 'had no proper shape or body, only an appearance, and to one person he appeared in one shape, and to another in a shape totally different; even the clothes that he seemed to be wearing were visionary' (F.C. Burkitt). Pantheistic. Cf stress on humanity of Jesus in John: 1.14; 4.6-8, 31; 9.6; 11.35; 12.27; 13.21; 19.28, 34.

John sought to conserve the church. Cf. modern threats of New Age, neo-paganism, etc.

The evidence and the verdict

John's Gospel demands a decision. The readers/hearers form a jury!

- He brings before us a number of *witnesses* to show that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. These are: the OT, John the Baptist, the disciples, God the Father, the Holy Spirit, Jesus' works, Jesus himself in his claims.
- John also records the *verdicts* reached by various people and groups who encountered Jesus. The Jury was divided (7.43)! Some people rejected him. Others listened and believed and came to love him and one another. These verdicts of faith present to John's readers both a model of belief and a challenge to believe.