

INTRODUCTION

Even the casual reader of the New Testament will notice that the first three accounts of Jesus' life are generally similar in their overall story line, whereas the fourth Gospel (John) is quite different. Scholars refer to Matthew, Mark, and Luke as the Synoptic Gospels (Synoptic = "seen together" or "as parallel") because of their similarities, but John is called, well . . . John (no special name). It is part of the New Testament collection known as the Johannine Writings (John, 1, 2, 3 John, and Revelation).

The differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John are readily apparent to the alert reader. For example the Synoptics all present one major trip of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, whereas John portrays Jesus as being in Judea and Jerusalem often. Indeed, for John the primary ministry of Jesus seems to be in Judea rather than the Galilean setting of the Synoptics. Another difference is seen in John's lack of true parables in his recorded teachings of Jesus. In the Synoptics, parables are the characteristic form of Jesus' teaching, with the often repeated introduction, "Jesus told them a parable, saying, 'the kingdom of God is like this . . .'" John is also loaded with characters we do not find in the Synoptics: Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, and Lazarus, just to name a few. Furthermore, some of our most memorable Gospel phrases are not found in the Synoptics, but only in John: "In the beginning was the Word." "Behold the Lamb of God!" "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I am the vine." "What is truth?" "It is finished!" "So send I you." By some estimates about 90% of the material found in John is not found in the Synoptic Gospels.¹

¹Compare this to the Gospel of Mark. About 90% of the material in Mark is also found in Matthew in some form.

Christian scholars have noticed these differences from ancient times. Clement of Alexandria, writing approximately AD 185, called John the “spiritual Gospel.” By this, Clement did not mean that John was nonhistorical, but that John was more concerned with internal, spiritual matters. In the more recent past overly critical scholars have pronounced the differences between John and the Synoptics to be irreconcilable and concluded that John is, in effect, the first commentary on the Gospels. This assumption (that John is historical fiction) exists in many commentaries of previous generations and is still held by some today. In general, though, current scholarship is much less certain about the nonhistorical character of John. In this commentary we assume that John relates a historically reliable version of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, albeit quite different from that of the Synoptic Gospels. These differences are part of what makes the study of this book so fascinating and will be discussed at the appropriate places through the commentary.

WHO IS THE AUTHOR?

We have been writing as if we knew for sure that John was the author of this Gospel. But this begs the question, how do we know for sure that John wrote it, and if so, which John was this? To answer the first question in complete honesty, we do not know for sure who wrote this book, for it was published anonymously in line with the publishing standards of the ancient world. We do have some very early witnesses to John as the author, however. The so-called “Muratorian Canon” (date disputed, but probably AD 150-200) says, “John, one of the disciples, wrote the fourth book of the Gospel.” An early church leader by the name of Irenaeus (AD 185) is also an important witness. Tradition claims that Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp of Smyrna, and that Polycarp was a student of John himself. This means that Irenaeus is only one generation of believers removed from John, which gives added weight to what he writes. Irenaeus states in no uncertain terms that John was the author of the Fourth Gospel (in his book *Against Heresies* 3.1.1).

Some scholars have suggested, however, that the author of the Fourth Gospel was indeed a man named John, but not John the

Apostle. It is true that there were other early Christian leaders named John, and it is possible that one of them is the true author of the Fourth Gospel. This issue may be addressed by determining the identity of the so-called “beloved disciple” within the book of John.

In John 21:20-24 the “disciple whom Jesus loved” is said to be the author of the book. If we work backwards through the book, we encounter the beloved disciple in other places. He is the one who recognizes Jesus after the resurrection during the miraculous catch of fish (21:7). Jesus entrusts the care for his mother, Mary, to this disciple while hanging on the cross (19:26-27). This disciple reclines next to Jesus at the Last Supper (13:23, 25). The beloved disciple is intended to be seen in some places where he is simply called the “other disciple.” He is the one who races Peter to the tomb on Easter morning, and arrives first (20:3-5, probably indicating that he was younger than Peter). It is the “other disciple” who gains entrance for Peter and himself into the high priest’s courtyard during the interrogation of Jesus (18:15-16). The “other disciple” may also be the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist who, along with Andrew, is pointed to Jesus by the Baptist himself (1:35-40).

The intimacy the beloved disciple has with Jesus points to one of the inner circle of disciples. In the Synoptic Gospels, this “inner circle” is pictured as Peter, James, and John. Peter is clearly not the author of the Fourth Gospel, because he is often portrayed as being with the “beloved disciple.” James is an unlikely candidate, because he suffers early martyrdom at the hands of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2). This leaves only John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, the brother of James. This case is somewhat strengthened by the fact that the Apostle John is named nowhere in the Fourth Gospel (nor is James, the only reference being to the “sons of Zebedee” at 21:2). It is not easy to understand why any other early Christian writer would have omitted the name of such a prominent Apostle. The solution to the mystery is that we are intended to see John himself as the author, and that he does not mention himself except as the “beloved disciple” or the “other disciple.” We should also note that this is not an expression of pride (he “loved me best”). It is an expression of deep humility, wonderment, and thankfulness on the part of the author: Jesus loved me, even me?!

WHEN AND WHERE WAS IT WRITTEN?

Many locations have been suggested as the place of composition for the Gospel of John, but the traditional site is the city of Ephesus. The ruins of Ephesus are in southwestern Turkey, near the modern city of Kusadasi. Ephesus was one of the largest and most important cities of the Roman Empire in the first century. Ephesus was the site of the Temple of Artemis (sometimes incorrectly called the Temple of Diana, see Acts 19:28). This temple was recognized as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world according to the Greek geographer, Strabo. This large city (perhaps as many as 500,000 inhabitants) had a very mixed population. There was a strong Christian community in Ephesus, for Paul had a three-year ministry there in the AD 50s. The presence of the Temple of Artemis shows that there was also a strong pagan community, dedicated to the worship of the ancient Greek gods. Overall it was a large, cosmopolitan city, with a well-developed Greek culture. The common language of the city would have been Greek, the language of the New Testament.

Although it cannot be proven, there is strong tradition that the Apostle John, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, made his way to Ephesus sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. John, at least, was probably in Ephesus during the reign of Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96). After a few years, Domitian seems to have actively persecuted the Christian community, and this atmosphere of persecution probably forms the background for the Fourth Gospel, written sometime between AD 85-95. Also, by this time, the Jewish synagogue community had solidified in its opposition to the Christians, and Jews had to make a choice between the two. Jews who chose to believe in Jesus were “thrown out of the synagogue,” a circumstance mentioned by John (9:22; 16:2).

This makes John one of the last books of the New Testament to be written, and certainly the last of the Gospels. If we theorize that John was about 20 when Jesus was crucified (AD 30), then he would have been 75-85 years old when this book was written, a very old man in the ancient world. For this and other reasons, it is likely that John had quite a bit of help in writing this book. Some scholars want to speak of the “Johannine community” or the “community of the beloved disciple” as the author, and there is some merit to this (cf. 21:24, “we know his testimony in true”). For our purposes,

however, we will assume that the Apostle John, an eyewitness to many of the Gospel events, is the primary author of this book.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF JOHN?

First, we would say that the style of John's writing is simple, but its thought is profound. John is written in some of the simplest Greek in the New Testament, although this does not mean it is "bad" Greek. It uses many common words, many monosyllabic words, and relatively short sentences. Yet the message of the book is profound. Fred Craddock notes that this is a Gospel in which "a child can wade and an elephant can swim."²

A second characteristic of John is that he has laid out the bulk of the book as a series of lengthy accounts of works followed by words. We can characterize these combinations as miraculous signs followed by discourses or sermons of Jesus. John has only seven miracles, five of which are not found in the Synoptic Gospels. The story of each of these miracles is told at some length, and the material of the sermon that follows is primarily material not found in the Synoptics.

A third characteristic of the Fourth Gospel is the emphasis upon the personal ministry of Jesus. John relates several one-on-one situations (e.g., Jesus with Nicodemus, chapter 3), which teach us that Jesus had an active private ministry. It was not all public preaching, although this was important, too. In John we see a Jesus who cares for people and has time for them. This has another side, however. Sometimes it emphasizes the aloneness of Jesus. He often seems to be by himself without the support of the disciples or anyone else, a solitary figure.

Fourthly, John has a highly developed theological interest. He is particularly concerned with the matter of Christology, explaining who Jesus is in relation to God. John lays stress on the divinity of Jesus, often referring to him as the Son or the Son of God. He also stresses the humanity of Jesus: he is thirsty at Sychar and weeps at the tomb of Lazarus. John develops the theme of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the one God sent to his people.

²Fred B. Craddock, *John*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), p. 3.

John also explores the nature of God the Father, particularly through the Father-Son relationship between Jesus and God. John emphasizes that faith for the Christian must be in both the Father and in the Son. And John also has a great deal of discussion about the Holy Spirit. This is found throughout the book, but particularly in the Farewell Discourses of chapters 13-17. Here the Holy Spirit is portrayed as the coming Paraclete or Advocate for the community of believers.

A fifth characteristic might also be called the purpose of John. This purpose is strongly evangelistic, to bring the readers to faith. There is a constant contrast in the Fourth Gospel between believers and unbelievers, between faith and unfaith. Toward the end of the book John lays out his purpose in very straightforward language, "These [things] are written that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

HOW WILL THE STUDY OF JOHN BE APPROACHED?

There are many possible ways to study John, but it is helpful to know what the primary emphasis will be in this commentary. Our main focus will be to listen carefully to what John is saying to us, to understand his intended message. This is not as easy as it may seem at first glance, for John is far removed from twentieth century English speakers. We want to know the general story, to pick up on the nuances, to be sensitive to the theological implications John is drawing out. For the most part we will not be concerned with evaluating the historical nature of John's account. When we bring historical data into the mix, it will be to help the reader understand the background of John's story, not to judge his accuracy. This is a modified narrative approach, an attempt to understand John's story as it is intended to be understood. While some may find this intolerably naïve, it is certainly the first and necessary step to a full appreciation of this marvelous book. If we can get you to listen to John carefully and hear his message, we will have succeeded in what we set out to do.

OUTLINE

A good outline is more than half the battle in one's understanding and remembering the contents of any book. There is more than one way to break up and organize the materials in the Gospel according to John. Most students have observed two large divisions in its structure: (1) chapters 1-12 and (2) chapters 13-21. These larger units include a prologue (1:1-18) and an epilogue (chapter 21). Perhaps the easiest way to organize the materials of the book for commentary purposes might be to number the larger units of thought in the book (over fifty such units) and comment successively on these from the beginning of the book to the end. One may endeavor, however, to organize the materials of the Fourth Gospel in some kind of elaborate outline, structured under the two large divisions noted above. We follow this latter procedure below:

I. JESUS MANIFESTS HIMSELF TO THE WORLD – 1:1-12:50

A. The Prologue – 1:1-18

1. The Logos before Time – 1:1-4
 - a. His Relationship to Deity – 1:1-2
 - b. His Relationship to the World – 1:3-4
2. The Logos Manifested in History – 1:5-18
 - a. John the Baptist's Initial Testimony to the Logos – 1:5-13
 - b. The Logos in Flesh – 1:14-18

B. The Testimony of John the Baptist and of Jesus' First Disciples – 1:19-51

1. The Testimony of John the Baptist – 1:19-34
 - a. The Testimony of John to the Jewish Leaders – 1:19-28
 - b. The Testimony of John to the Jewish People – 1:29-34
2. Jesus' Calling and the Testifying of His First Disciples – 1:35-51

- a. John the Baptist's Disciples Follow Jesus — 1:35-42
 - b. Jesus' Calling of Philip and Nathanael — 1:43-51
- C. Jesus' First Signs — 2:1-25**
 - 1. Jesus Changes Water into Wine — 2:1-12
 - 2. Jesus Cleanses the Temple — 2:13-22
 - 3. Summary of Response to Jesus — 2:23-25
- D. Jesus and Nicodemus — 3:1-36**
 - 1. The New Birth — 3:1-10
 - 2. The Son of Man — 3:11-21
 - 3. The Further Testimony of John the Baptist — 3:22-30
 - 4. The Son's Testimony — 3:31-36
- E. Jesus and the Samaritans — 4:1-42**
 - 1. Introduction — 4:1-4
 - 2. Jesus and the Woman of Samaria — 4:5-30
 - a. The Setting — 4:5-6
 - b. Jesus' Request for Water — 4:7-9
 - c. Living Water — 4:10-15
 - d. The Woman Revealed — 4:16-19
 - e. Jesus Reveals Himself — 4:20-26
 - f. Reactions to Jesus — 4:27-30
 - 3. Jesus and the Samaritans — 4:31-42
 - a. Jesus and the Testifying of His disciples — 4:31-38
 - b. Firsthand and Secondhand Testimony — 4:39-42
- F. Jesus' Healing of the Nobleman's Son, the Second Sign at Cana — 4:43-54**
 - 1. Introduction — 4:43-45
 - 2. The Healing of the Nobleman's Son — 4:46-54
- G. Jesus and the Major Jewish Festivals — 5:1-12:50**
 - 1. A Feast, the Sabbath, and Jesus' Healing at the Pool in Jerusalem — 5:1-47
 - a. The Healing on the Sabbath — 5:1-9a
 - b. Violations of the Sabbath and the Healed Man's Defense — 5:9b-15
 - c. Violations of the Sabbath and Jesus' Defense — 5:16-18
 - d. Jesus' Discourse on the Sabbath and His Work — 5:19-29
 - e. Jesus' Defense and the Four Witnesses — 5:30-47
 - 2. The Passover and Jesus' Explanation of the Exodus — 6:1-71

- a. The Background – 6:1-4
- b. Jesus' Feeding of the Five Thousand – 6:5-13
- c. Jesus, Not That Kind of King – 6:14-15
- d. Jesus' Walking on the Sea of Galilee – 6:16-21
- e. The Crowds' Search for Jesus – 6:22-25
- f. Two Discourses on the Bread of Life – 6:26-34, 35-40
- g. Conflict Concerning Bread from Heaven and Flesh and Blood – 6:41-59
- h. Rejection and Acceptance of Jesus – 6:60-71
- 3. Jesus at Tabernacles – 7:1-52
 - a. Introduction: Question If Jesus Would Go to This Feast – 7:1-13
 - b. Jesus' Discourses Spoken during the Feast – 7:14-36
 - c. Jesus' Discourses Spoken on the Last Day of the Feast and the Audience's Response to it – 7:37-52
 - d. *Textual Parenthesis*: The Woman Taken in Adultery – 7:53-8:11
- 4. The Light of Tabernacles and Jesus' Great Confrontation with the Jews – 8:12-59
 - a. Jesus Discourse at the Temple Treasury: Jesus the Light of the World and the Authority of His Testimony to Himself – 8:12-20
 - b. Jesus' Attack on the Jews Who Disbelieved and the Origin of His Testimony and the Problem of Who He Is – 8:21-30
 - c. Truth, Sin, Freedom, and the Children of Abraham – 8:31-59
- 5. Healing of the Man Born Blind – 9:1-41
 - a. The Setting – 9:1-5
 - b. The Healing – 9:6-7
 - c. Interrogations of the Man – 9:8-34
 - (1) Questions Posed by the Neighbors and Friends – 9:8-12
 - (2) Preliminary Quizzing by Some Pharisees – 9:13-17
 - (3) The Man's Parents Questioned by the Jews – 9:18-23
 - (4) The Man Questioned a Second Time by the Jews, and Excommunicated – 9:24-34

- d. Who Sees and Who Is Blind? Jesus' Answer – 9:35-41
- 6. The Feast of Dedication and the Shepherd Analogy – 10:1-42
 - a. Jesus, the Sheepgate, and the Shepherd – 10:1-21
 - (1) Figures from Shepherd Life – 10:1-6
 - (2) Explaining the Figure – 10:7-18
 - (a) Jesus is the Sheepgate – 10:7-10
 - (b) Jesus is the Good (or Model) Shepherd – 10:11-18
 - (3) Response to Jesus' Explanation: Rejection of Jesus by the Jews – 10:19-21
 - b. Jesus at the Feast of Dedication – 10:22-39
 - (1) Jesus the Messiah – 10:22-31
 - (a) Setting and Questions: "Is Jesus the Messiah?" – 10:22-24
 - (b) Jesus' Reply – 10:25-30
 - (c) Reaction: Attempt to Stone Jesus – 10:31
 - (2) Jesus the Son of God – 10:32-39
 - (a) The Question: Is Jesus Making Himself Equal with God – 10:32-33
 - (b) Jesus' Response – 10:34-38
 - (c) Reaction: Attempt to Arrest Jesus – 10:39
 - c. Jesus in Retrogression and Progression Simultaneously – 10:40-42
- 7. Lazarus and the Passover Plot – 11:1-57
 - a. Lazarus – 11:1-44
 - (1) Setting – 11:1-6
 - (2) Jesus' Discussion with the Disciples – 11:7-16
 - (3) Jesus and Martha: Jesus the Resurrection and the Life – 11:17-27
 - (4) Jesus and Mary and the Grieved – 11:28-37
 - (5) Jesus' Raising of Lazarus – 11:38-44
 - b. The Passover Plot to Kill Jesus – 11:45-53
 - c. Retreat of Jesus – 11:54-57
- 8. Preparation for Passover and Death – 12:1-50
 - a. Mary's Anointing of Jesus – 12:1-11
 - b. Jesus' Triumphal Entry – 12:12-19
 - c. Gentiles Prompt Jesus' Announcement of His Hour – 12:20-36

- d. The Tragedy of Unbelief, Past and Present – 12:37-43
- e. The Call to Faith Still Stands – 12:44-50

II. JESUS' MANIFESTATION OF HIMSELF IN HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION – 13:1-21:25

A. Jesus' Manifestation of Himself to His Disciples in His Farewell Discourses – 13:1-17:26

1. At the Last Supper – 13:1-38
 - a. Jesus' Washing of His Disciples' Feet – 13:1-17
 - b. Jesus' Prediction of Judas' Betrayal – 13:18-30
 - c. Jesus' Prediction of Peter's Denial; The New Commandment (13:34) – 13:31-38
2. Promises of Jesus – 14:1-31
 - a. Promises of an Abode where Jesus Is Going – 14:1-4
 - b. Jesus the Way to the Father – 14:5-12
 - c. Doing Greater Works than Jesus; Asking in Jesus' Name – 14:13-14
 - d. Jesus' Departure and the Spirit's Coming – 14:15-31
3. More Commands and Promises of Jesus – 15:1-27
 - a. Jesus, the Vine; the Disciples, the Branches; The New Commandment Given (15:13) – 15:1-17
 - b. Hatred from the World – 15:18-25
 - c. The Spirit's Mission Like That of the Disciples: to Bear Witness to Jesus – 15:26-27
4. Still More Promises and Commands – 16:1-33
 - a. The Works of Disbelief – 16:1-4
 - b. The Works of the Spirit – 16:5-15
 - c. Joy Greater than Trouble – 16:16-33
5. Jesus' Prayer – 17:1-26
 - a. For His Glorification – 17:1-5
 - b. For His Disciples – 17:6-19
 - c. For Those Who Will Believe – 17:20-26
 - (1) For Unity – 17:20-23
 - (2) For Seeing Jesus' Glory – 17:24-26

B. Jesus' Trial and Crucifixion – 18:1-19:42

1. Jesus' Arrest – 18:1-11
2. Jesus' Trial before Annas – 18:12-14
3. Peter's First Denial of Jesus – 18:15-18
4. Jesus Interrogated before Annas – 18:19-24

5. Peter's Second and Third Denials of Jesus – 18:25-27
6. Jesus' Trial before Pilate – 18:28-19:16
 - a. Pilate Doubtful of the Prosecution – 18:28-32
 - b. Pilate Examines Jesus – 18:33-38a
 - c. Barabbas – 18:38b-40
 - d. The Flogging of Jesus and Delivering Over of Him to the Jews by Pilate – 19:1-16
7. The Crucifixion of Jesus – 19:17-30
8. Piercing Jesus' Side – 19:31-37
9. Jesus' Burial – 19:38-42
- C. The Resurrection of Jesus – 20:1-21:25**
 1. Peter and John at the Empty Tomb – 20:1-9
 2. Jesus' Appearance to Mary – 20:10-18
 3. Jesus' Appearance to the Disciples with Thomas Absent – 20:19-23
 4. Jesus' Appearance to his Disciples with Thomas Present – 20:24-29
 5. The Purpose of this Gospel – 20:30-31
 6. Jesus' Appearance to Seven Disciples and the Great Haul of Fish – 21:1-14
 7. Jesus' Admonition to Peter about Peter – 21:15-19
 8. Jesus' Admonition to Peter about John – 21:20-23
 9. Testimony to the Truthfulness of the Contents of the Fourth Gospel – 21:24
 10. The Selective Nature of the Contents of the Fourth Gospel – 21:25