

Introducing John's Gospel

Introduction

The aim of this first study is to provide a brief introduction to the Gospel of John and thus provide a platform on which to build in our further studies. In particular we want to answer 4 important questions. First *who* wrote the Gospel? Second, *what* are the main themes of the Gospel, its primary emphases? Third, *how* is the Gospel structured? Fourth, *why* was the Gospel written? Needless to say, we can only deal with these questions in a superficial way in a brief study such as this, and certainly our conclusions regarding *content*, *structure*, and *purpose* will need to be tested as we make our way through the Gospel. But such a preliminary assessment will certainly help to orientate us for the journey ahead.

4 Key Questions

1. Who wrote the Fourth Gospel?

Like the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the Fourth Gospel does not actually name its author. But as one writer comments, there is a kind of authorial presence which is 'felt' throughout the Fourth Gospel in the references to the *beloved disciple* (see John 13vs23, 19vs26-27, 20vs2-9 & 21vs24) and in the 'eye witness' nature of the testimony within its pages. According to John 21vs24 it is the *beloved disciple* who 'testifies to these things and who wrote them down.' The word 'testifies' suggests the work of an eye-witness rather than as is the case of Luke a careful researcher. It thus seems reasonable to identify the author with this *beloved disciple*. Who then was this disciple?

We know from the Synoptic Gospels that Peter, James and John had a privileged position among the apostles. We also know from John 13vs23-24 and 21vs20-24 that Peter is to be distinguished from the *beloved disciple* which leaves James or John as possible contenders. Furthermore, we know that James was martyred toward the end of the reign of Herod Agrippa (*circa* 41-44AD – see Acts 12vs1-2) and that he could therefore not have written the Fourth Gospel which dates, probably from the mid-80's. There is certainly no early church tradition linking James to the Fourth Gospel, whereas there is a strong tradition identifying the Apostle John as the *beloved disciple*. It thus seems reasonable to concur with this tradition and to see John as the author of the Fourth Gospel.¹

¹ It may well be that John 21 is in part the work of some people close to the Apostle John, added perhaps after his death (see especially the comment in John 21vs23)

2. What are the main themes of John's Gospel?

Although this question is best answered in the light of a careful study of the content of John's Gospel, it is worth highlighting some things in advance to alert the reader of the Gospel to some important themes and ideas. These, as we shall see in our next study, are certainly introduced and anticipated in the so-called Prologue (John 1vs1-18), but they are also highlighted in the purpose statement in John 20vs30-31. Four things can be singled out, namely:

- a. Word / Revelation (primarily concerning Jesus' identity as the Christ and Son of God.) The word 'light' is closely connected to this idea of revelation.
- b. Witness (manifested both in words and 'signs') Linked with this is the importance of 'truth'.
- c. Belief (or its opposite) (often demonstrated in character sketch e.g Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman)
- d. Life which is the outcome of faith and the goal of revelation and witness.

These key themes are interwoven with other Biblical themes to demonstrate that in life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has brought His creation purposes to fulfilment.

3. How is John's Gospel structured?

Although John's Gospel is strongly thematic, it does follow a basic chronological thread and, given its focus around Jesus' Judean ministry, fills in some key information which is missing from the predominantly Galilean focussed Synoptic Gospels.

In general we note that the Gospel can be divided into 5 major sections, namely

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| a. Chapter 1vs1-18 | Prologue |
| b. Chapter 1vs19-12vs50 | Revelation in Word and Deed |
| c. Chapter 13-17 | The Upper Room Discourse |
| d. Chapter 18-20 | Arrest, Trial, Crucifixion and Resurrection |
| e. Chapter 21 | Epilogue |

These sections can of course be sub-divided and analysed in greater detail, something we will do in our weekly studies.

4. Why was John's Gospel written?

In answering this question it is important for us to distinguish the themes of the Gospel from its purpose, which purpose is actually clearly stated for us in John 20vs30,31.

Here John tells us that he has been selective in what he has recorded (vs 30) and that what he has recorded is written so that the reader "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" and that by believing he or she "may have life in His name." (vs 31). It is not entirely clear whether this 'believing' is first time faith (conversion) or continuing faith (perseverance). In many ways it is unnecessary to choose between the two, but given that this verse may well be rendered **that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God is Jesus** it is probably likely that the original purpose of John's gospel was to be an evangelistic tract for Jews of the dispersion, i.e. living outside of Palestine.