

Introducing John

Jesus = Life + Light + Love



The Gospel of John tells the enduring story of life, light and love in Jesus Christ. It is refreshingly simple and yet deeply profound. Reading John has been compared to swimming in the ocean: the newest beginner can enjoy its shallows, while the mature believer can forever plumb its depths.



Author and date

The author is strictly anonymous but it is likely to be the apostle, John, the son of Zebedee, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (13:23, 19:26, 21:7, 20). A date late in the first century is generally preferred i.e. AD 90.

Purpose

It is hard to go past John's own statement of purpose, '*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*' (20:31). John was written so that people might believe in Jesus and find life eternal.

And yet there is an interesting debate about the translation of 'believe'. It may be about **evangelism** ('come to believe') or **edification** ('continue to believe'). Ultimately, it seems best to retain both possibilities and see John's purpose as encouraging belief in Jesus at whatever stage may be appropriate for the individual reader.

Genre

An important step to understanding any book is to grasp the genre - the type of writing. The Gospel of John is in the genre of "Gospel". It is not a letter or a tract or a confession. It is not strict biography, or theology, or history. It is a "Gospel" - a flexible form that aims to give a selective account of the life of Jesus, including his teaching and miracles and culminating in his death and resurrection. Another way to understand the genre of Gospel is to think of it as **theological history** i.e. anchored within history but with a particular focus on God.

A comparison between John and the other gospels shows **important differences** in both substance, style and chronology.

- In terms of substance, a large amount of material in Matthew, Mark and Luke is lacking in John, and a considerable amount of material in John is also absent from the synoptic gospels. One reason for this difference lies in the fact that John focuses his attention on the ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem, whereas the synoptic gospels focus on his ministry in Galilee.
- In terms of style, the synoptic gospels feature the parables of Jesus, whereas John features a dialogue and discourse style. It seems likely that John was drawn to a more reflective style of writing.
- There are also some notable chronological differences, such as the cleansing of the temple and the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. The solution may lie in the different calendars used by John but it is hard to know with certainty.

All these differences may lead some to doubt John's presentation of Jesus. But these differences are exaggerated. When we consider the different purposes of the gospels, and the different people who interacted with Jesus, the differences are more intelligible.

Structure

Key sections

Prologue	1:1-18
The book of signs	1:19-12:50
The book of glory	13:1-20:31
Epilogue	21:1-25

Series breakup

Introducing Jesus	1-4
Jesus clashes with the Jews	5-12
Jesus teaches the disciples	13-17
The death and resurrection of Jesus	18-21



Themes

- **Christology** i.e. understanding of Jesus
 - Jesus as the **Messiah** - the status of Jesus as Messiah is a topic of frequent discussion.
 - Jesus as **God the Son** - the relationship between God the Father and God the Son is a feature of John.
 - Jesus as **God** - the pre-existence and deity of Jesus is explicit in the prologue and is alluded to throughout John.
 - Jesus as **Son of Man** - this title is not as prominent compared to the synoptic gospels but it is still a feature in John.
 - Jesus as a **man** - there are many indications of the humanity of Jesus in his experience of emotion, hunger, thirst and tiredness.
- **"I am"** statements - The seven "I am" statements are a memorable feature in John. They all explain different aspects of who Jesus is and what he came to do.
- **Signs and faith** - The relationship between signs and faith is contentious throughout John but it is clear that faith in Jesus is the ultimate purpose of the signs of Jesus.
- **Predestination** - John emphasises that belief is totally dependent on the work of the Father. But as we see elsewhere in the Bible, this still sits alongside a stress to believe and respond.
- The **Holy Spirit** - The Spirit is mentioned frequently in John, particularly in the "farewell discourses" (14-16).

Further reading

Paul Barnett, *John: The Shepherd King* (Reading the Bible today) - As the series title suggests, this book is designed for those who want to read the Bible and respond to its message. It's relatively short yet full of insights. And Paul Barnett is an excellent guide.

Donald Guthrie, *John* (New Bible Commentary) - The New Bible Commentary is a must-have for Christians. It contains helpful notes on every book of the Bible. The section on John includes context, structure, theology, as well as verse-by-verse comment on the text.

Bruce Milne, *The Message of John* (The Bible Speaks Today) - A more detailed commentary but doesn't get lost in technicalities. I recommend this series for those who want to dig deeper.

