



Who Are The Apostles? Week #3: Introducing John, The Evangelist

Apostles, symbols of In Christian art, symbols assigned to each of the apostles:

- **Andrew:** X-shaped cross because he was crucified on one;
- **Bartholomew:** knife because he was flayed alive with one;
- **James the Great:** scallop shell, pilgrim staff, or a gourd bottle because he is the patron saint of pilgrims;
- **James the Less:** fuller's pole because he was killed with one;
- **John:** cup with a winged serpent because he drank poison after making a sign of the cross;
- **Judas Iscariot:** bag because he kept money in it;
- **Jude:** club because he was martyred with it;
- **Matthew:** hatchet or halberd because he was killed with it;
- **Matthias:** battleaxe because he was beheaded with it;
- **Paul:** sword because he was beheaded with one;
- **Peter:** bunch of keys because Christ gave him the keys of the kingdom;
- **Simon:** a saw because he was sawn to death;
- **Phillip:** long staff surmounted with a cross because he suffered death by being suspended by the neck from a pillar;
- **Thomas:** lance with which he was pierced through at Mylapore, India.¹

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

Matthew 4:18-22

¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Mark 1:16-20

¹⁶ Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become ^(B)fishers of men.” ^[a] ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Luke 5:1-11

⁵ On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret,² and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴ And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵ And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” ⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷ They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” ⁹ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee,

¹ Kurian, G. T. (2001). In *Nelson's new Christian dictionary: the authoritative resource on the Christian world*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.



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who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”^[a] ¹¹ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

John 1:35-42

³⁵ The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples,³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹ He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.^[d] ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus^[b] was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter^[c]).

Note:

- John was a disciple of John the Baptist. But not his brother James.
- He and Andrew spent the day after Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist with Jesus (John 1:35-40).
- James is always listed first = He is older than John
- Partners with Simon Peter (Luke 5:10)
- “Walk out” on their father was not them walking off the job and leaving him in a lurch.
- Patron Status – Jesus calling you to be his disciple was seen as an honor and a status symbol for the family.
- Zebedee owned boats and had servants. Prosperous.
- Zebedee = Jesus’ Uncle?
 - Matthew reports that “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons” were present at the crucifixion

Matt. 27:55-56

⁵⁵ There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, ⁵⁶ among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Mark 15:40-41

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

- Mark reports that “Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome” brought spices to embalm Jesus

Mark 16:1

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and ^(E)Salome ^(E)bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

- John says that “his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” were at the foot of the cross

John 19:25

²⁵ but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

- If this third woman, variously identified as “the mother of Zebedee’s sons,” “Salome,” and “his mother’s sister,” are all the same person, then Zebedee was married to Mary’s sister Salome and was therefore Jesus’ uncle; and thus James and John were his cousins.



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- If that is the case, since they lived only about fifteen miles apart, they would undoubtedly have known each other all their lives. Jesus would also have known their friends Simon Peter and Andrew, again probably since childhood. This could have been the reason why Jesus chose to make Capernaum his home when he was rejected in Nazareth.
- It must be noted, however, that many scholars reject this relationship on the basis that if they were indeed cousins the Bible would have made that clear, because such relationships were considered very important in those times.

Losch, R. R. (2008). In *All the People in the Bible: An A-Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and Other Characters in Scripture* (pp. 185–186). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

- John, along with his brother James and Peter, were among the “inner circle” of the apostles.
 - They were the only ones of the twelve whom Jesus allowed to join him at the raising of Jairus’s daughter **Luke 8:49-51** (**Matthew 9:18-16 & Mark 5:22-43**)

⁴⁹ While he was still speaking, someone from the ruler's house came and said, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher any more." ⁵⁰ But Jesus on hearing this answered him, "Do not fear; only believe, and she will be well." ⁵¹ And when he came to the house, he allowed no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James, and the father and mother of the child.

- They were the only three whom he brought with him onto the Mount of Transfiguration.

Matthew 17:1-8 ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear."

Mark 9:2-8 ³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one (laundress) on earth could bleach them.

Luke 9:28-36

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. ³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" ³⁶ And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

- Jesus took Peter, James, and John aside with him while he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew 26:36-46

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch^[d] with me." ³⁹ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰ And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴² Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." ⁴³ And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on.^[e] See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

Luke 22:39-46

⁴⁴ And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. ⁴⁵ And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation."

John 18 (mentions being in a garden)



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- James and John were obviously men of strong personality, and they were also capable of being rash, speaking without thinking.

Mark 3:17 *James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder) (Aramaic)*

- When the Samaritans were rude to Jesus, James and John asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" Jesus, of course, rebuked them

Luke 9:54

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. ⁵³ But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" (as Elijah did)

⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ And they went on to another village.

(Some manuscripts add *And he said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; ⁵⁶ for the Son of Man came not to destroy people's lives but to save them"*)

- The Request of James and John

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" ³⁹ And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." ⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. ⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave^[el] of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

[In fulfillment of this prophecy, James was executed at the order of Herod Agrippa I, shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. This is the only martyrdom of an apostle that is recorded in the Bible.]

- John and James mirrored one another. Intertwined as brothers.
- John survived James by several years as a prominent leader of the church.
- The book of Acts tells of his accompanying Peter on several missions, during one of which they healed a cripple (Acts 3).

Acts 3:3-10 The Lame Beggar Healed

³ Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.[3PM] ² And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. ³ Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. ⁴ And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up



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and walk!"⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.⁸ And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.⁹ And all the people saw him walking and praising God,¹⁰ and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

- They also incurred the wrath of the leaders of the Jews (Acts 4:3ff.).

Acts 4:1-22 Peter and John Before the Council

4 And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them,² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

5 On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem,⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders,⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed,¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well.¹¹ This Jesus^[a] is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.^[b] ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men^[c] by which we must be saved."

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.¹⁴ But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.¹⁵ But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another,¹⁶ saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.¹⁷ But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name."¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge,²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."²¹ And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened.²² For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

- John was also a member of the Council of Jerusalem that settled the Judaizing controversy

Galatians 2:7-9

⁷ On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised⁸ (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles),⁹ and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.¹⁰ Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

- Author of Revelation, John 1,2,3, John.

Aside from Luke and the apostle Paul, John wrote more of the New Testament than any other human author.

- We see through his Gospel how he views Christ.
- We observe in his epistles how he dealt with the church.



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□ And in the book of Revelation we even see the future through the visions God gave him.

- Nicknamed “the apostle of love.”

SMALL GROUP?

- How did he go from being a “Son of Thunder” to “Apostle of Love”?

Mark 9:38-41 (Lk9:49-40) Anyone Not Against Us Is for Us

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name,³⁹ and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰For the one who is not against us is for us.⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

John 13:34 *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*

John 15:12 *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

John 15:17 *These things I command you, so that you will love one another.*

1 John 3:11 Love One Another

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

1 John 3:23 *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.*

1 John 4:7 God Is Love

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:11-12 *Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*

But John aged well. Under the control of the Holy Spirit, all his liabilities were exchanged for assets.

HE LOVED TRUTH with zeal:

John’s zeal for the truth shaped the way he wrote. Of all the writers of the New Testament, he is the most black and white in his thinking.

He thinks and writes in absolutes.

He deals with certainties.

There aren’t many gray areas in his teaching, because he tends to state things in unqualified, antithetical language.

He uses the Greek word for *truth* twenty-five times in his Gospel and twenty more times in his epistles.

He wrote, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John 4).

His strongest epithet for someone who claimed to be a believer while walking in darkness was to describe the person as “a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4; cf. 1:6, 8).

No one in all of Scripture, except the Lord Himself, had more to say extolling the very concept of truth.

Gospel of John:

He sets light against darkness, life against death, the kingdom of God against the kingdom of the devil, the children of God against the children of Satan, the judgment of the righteous against the judgment of the wicked, the resurrection of life against the resurrection of damnation, receiving Christ against rejecting Christ, fruit against fruitlessness, obedience against disobedience, and love against hatred. He loves dealing with truth in absolutes and opposites. He understands the necessity of drawing a clear line.



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The Epistles:

- He tells us we are either walking in the light or dwelling in darkness. If we are born of God, we do not sin—indeed, we *cannot* sin (1 John 3:9).
- We are either “of God” or “of the world” (1 John 4:4–5).
- If we love, we are born of God; and if we don’t love, we are not born of God (vv. 7–8). John writes, “Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (1 John 3:6).

2 John 6-11 Total Separation from all that is false

“And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.” ⁷ For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸ Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. ⁹ Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

But zeal for the truth must be balanced by a love for people or it becomes a liability.

Grow up plan:

- But **Mark 9:9** says, “As they came down from the mountain, [Jesus] commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen, till the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”
- **Mark 9:35-37** Of course, Jesus knew. And He seized the opportunity to teach them once again. “He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.’ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me’ ”
- **1 Corinthians 13:4-5** “Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own”

John learned truth and love:

His brief second epistle offers vivid proof of how well he balanced the twin virtues of truth and love. Throughout that epistle, John repeatedly couples the concepts of love and truth. He writes, “To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth” (v. 1). He says, “I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth” (v. 4), and then he spends the first half of the epistle urging them to walk in love as well. He reminds them of the New Commandment, which of course is not really new, but simply restates the commandment we have heard from the beginning: “that we love one another” (v. 5).

John learned about humility:

John’s humility also comes through in the gentle way he appeals to his readers in every one of his epistles. He calls them “little children,” “beloved”—and he includes himself as a brother and fellow child of God (cf. 1 John 3:2).

John learned the balance of Suffering and Glory:



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Virtually all reliable sources in early church history attest to the fact that John became the pastor of the church the apostle Paul had founded at Ephesus. From there, during a great persecution of the church under the Roman Emperor Domitian (brother and successor of Titus, who destroyed Jerusalem), John was banished to a prison community on Patmos, one of the small Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea off the west coast of modern Turkey. He lived in a cave there. It was while there that he received and recorded the apocalyptic visions described in the book of Revelation (cf. Revelation 1:9). I have been to the cave in which he is thought to have lived and in which he is believed to have written the Apocalypse. It was a harsh environment for an aged man. He was cut off from those whom he loved, treated with cruelty and reproach, and made to sleep on a stone slab with a rock for a pillow as the years passed slowly.

Powerful proof of this is seen in a vignette from the cross. Remember, John is the only one of the apostles whom the biblical record places as an eyewitness to the crucifixion. John himself describes the scene as Jesus looked down from the cross and saw His mother, Mary, along with her sister, another Mary (wife of Clopas), Mary Magdalene, and John (John 19:25). John writes, “When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home” (vv. 26–27).

Obviously, John had learned the lessons he needed to learn. He had learned to be a humble, loving servant—or else Jesus would not have given him the care of His own mother. He told Peter, “Feed My sheep” (John 21:17). He told John, “Care for My mother.” Several witnesses in early church history record that John never left Jerusalem and never left the care of Mary until she died.

- He outlived the other Apostles.
- Patriarch of the Church at Ephesus
- There is an ancient and quite reasonable tradition that John, into whose care Jesus gave Mary (John 19:25ff.), moved with her to Ephesus, where they both eventually died and were buried.

SMALL GROUP:

One word that describes JOHN the Apostle is:

What is there about John’s life that inspires you? How does it inspire you?

FOR ME PERSONALLY:

Practice a bit of JOHN in my life:

NoteS:

5

JOHN—THE APOSTLE OF LOVE

Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.

—JOHN 13:23



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The apostle John is familiar to us because he wrote so much of the New Testament. He was the human author of a Gospel and three epistles that bear his name, as well as the book of Revelation. **Aside from Luke and the apostle Paul, John wrote more of the New Testament than any other human author.** Scripture is therefore full of insights into his personality and character. In fact, most of what we know about John we extract from his own writings. **We see through his Gospel how he views Christ. We observe in his epistles how he dealt with the church. And in the book of Revelation we even see the future through the visions God gave him.**

Both Scripture and history record that John played a major role in the early church. Of course, he was a member of the Lord's most intimate inner circle, but he was by no means the dominant member of that group. He was the younger brother of James, and although he was a frequent companion to Peter in the first twelve chapters of Acts, Peter remained in the foreground and John remained in the background.

But John also had his turn at leadership. Ultimately, because he outlived all the others, he filled a unique and patriarchal role in the early church that lasted nearly to the end of the first century and reached deep into Asia Minor. His personal influence was therefore indelibly stamped on the primitive church, well into the post-apostolic era.

Almost everything we observed about the personality and character of James is also true of John, the younger half of the Boanerges Brothers' duo. The two men had similar temperaments, and as we noted in the previous chapter, they were inseparable in the Gospel accounts. John was right there with James, eager to call down fire from heaven against the Samaritans. He was also in the thick of the debates about who was the greatest. His zeal and ambition mirrored that of his elder brother.

Therefore it is all the more remarkable that John has often been nicknamed "the apostle of love." Indeed, he wrote more than any other New Testament author about the importance of love—laying particular stress on the Christian's love for Christ, Christ's love for His church, and the love for one another that is supposed to be the hallmark of true believers. The theme of love flows through his writings.

But love was a quality he learned from Christ, not something that came naturally to him. In his younger years, he was as much a Son of Thunder as James. If you imagine that John was the way he was often portrayed in medieval art—a meek, mild, pale-skinned, effeminate person, lying around on Jesus' shoulder looking up at Him with a dove-eyed stare—forget that caricature. He was rugged and hard-edged, just like the rest of the fishermen-disciples. And again, he was every bit as intolerant, ambitious, zealous, and explosive as his elder brother. In fact, the one and only time the synoptic Gospel writers recorded John speaking for himself, he displayed his trademark aggressive, self-assertive, impertinent intolerance.

If you study Matthew, Mark, and Luke you'll notice that John is nearly always named along with someone else—with Jesus, with Peter, or with James. Only one time does John appear and speak alone. And that was when he confessed to the Lord that he had rebuked a man for casting out demons in Jesus' name, because the man was not part of the disciples' group (Mark 9:38). We'll examine that episode shortly.

So it is clear from the Gospel accounts that John was capable of behaving in the most sectarian, narrow-minded, unbending, reckless, and impetuous fashion. He was volatile. He was brash. He was aggressive. He was passionate, zealous, and personally ambitious—just like his brother James. They were cut from the same bolt of cloth.

But John aged well. Under the control of the Holy Spirit, all his liabilities were exchanged for assets. Compare the young disciple with the aged patriarch, and you'll see that as he matured, his areas of greatest weakness all developed into his greatest strengths. He's an amazing example of what should happen to us as we grow in Christ—allowing the Lord's strength to be made perfect in our weakness.

When we think of the apostle John today, we usually think of a tender-hearted, elderly apostle. As the elder statesman of the church near the end of the first century, he was universally beloved and respected for his devotion to Christ and his great love for the saints worldwide. That is precisely why he earned the epithet, "apostle of love."

As we shall see, however, love did not nullify the apostle John's passion for truth. Rather, it gave him the balance he needed. He retained to the end of his life a deep and abiding love for God's truth, and he remained bold in proclaiming it to the very end.



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John's zeal for the truth shaped the way he wrote. Of all the writers of the New Testament, he is the most black and white in his thinking. He thinks and writes in absolutes. He deals with certainties. Everything is cut-and-dried with him. There aren't many gray areas in his teaching, because he tends to state things in unqualified, antithetical language.

For example, in his Gospel, he sets light against darkness, life against death, the kingdom of God against the kingdom of the devil, the children of God against the children of Satan, the judgment of the righteous against the judgment of the wicked, the resurrection of life against the resurrection of damnation, receiving Christ against rejecting Christ, fruit against fruitlessness, obedience against disobedience, and love against hatred. He loves dealing with truth in absolutes and opposites. He understands the necessity of drawing a clear line.

The same approach carries through in his epistles. He tells us we are either walking in the light or dwelling in darkness. If we are born of God, we do not sin—indeed, we cannot sin (1 John 3:9). We are either “of God” or “of the world” (1 John 4:4–5). If we love, we are born of God; and if we don’t love, we are not born of God (vv. 7–8). John writes, “Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (1 John 3:6). He says all these things without qualification and without any softening of the hard lines.

In his second epistle, he calls for complete, total separation from all that is false: “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (vv. 9–11). He ends his third epistle with these words in verse 11: “He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God.”

John is just that black and white.

Of course, even as John is writing such things, he knows and understands very well that believers do sin (cf. 1 John 2:1; 1:8, 10), but he doesn’t belabor or even develop the point. He is concerned primarily with the overall pattern of a person’s life. He wants to underscore the fact that righteousness, not sin, is the dominant principle in a true believer’s life. Those who read John carelessly or superficially might almost think he is saying there are no exceptions.

Paul is the apostle of the exceptions. Paul took time to explain the struggle all believers experience with sin in their lives (Romans 7). While Paul also states that those who are born of God do not continue in habitual sin as a pattern of life (Romans 6:6–7), he nonetheless acknowledges that we must still wage war against the remnants of sin in our members, resist the tendencies of our flesh, put off the old man, put on the new, and so on. From reading John, one might think that righteousness comes so easily and naturally to the Christian that every failure would be enough to shatter our assurance completely. That is why when I read heavy doses of John, I sometimes have to turn to Paul’s epistles just to find some breathing space.

Of course, both Paul’s and John’s epistles are inspired Scripture, and both emphases are necessary. The exceptions dealt with by Paul don’t nullify the truths stated so definitively by John. And the relentlessly unequivocal statements of John don’t rule out the careful qualifications given by Paul. Both are necessary aspects of God’s revealed truth.

But the way John wrote was a reflection of his personality. Truth was his passion, and he seemed to bend over backwards not to make it fuzzy. He spoke in black-and-white, absolute, certain terms, and he did not waste ink coloring in all the gray areas. He gave rules of thumb without listing all the exceptions. Jesus Himself often spoke in absolutes just like that, and John no doubt learned his teaching style from the Lord. Although John always wrote with a warm, personal, pastoral tone, what he wrote does not always make for soothing reading. It does, however, always reflect his deep convictions and his absolute devotion to the truth.

It is probably fair to say that one of the dangerous tendencies for a man with John’s personality is that he would have a natural inclination to push things to extremes. And indeed, it does seem that John in his



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younger years was a bit of an extremist. He seemed to lack a sense of spiritual equilibrium. His zeal, his sectarianism, his intolerance, and his selfish ambition were all sins of *imbalance*. They were all potential virtues, pushed to sinful extremes. That is why the greatest strengths of his character sometimes ironically *caused* his most prominent failures. Peter and James had a similar tendency to turn their greatest strengths into weaknesses. Their *best* characteristics frequently became pitfalls for them.

We all fall prey to this principle from time to time. It is one of the effects of human depravity. Even our best characteristics, corrupted by sin, become an occasion of stumbling. It is wonderful to have a high regard for the truth, *but zeal for the truth must be balanced by a love for people*, or it can give way to judgmentalism, harshness, and a lack of compassion. It is fine to be hardworking and ambitious, but if ambition is not balanced with humility, it becomes sinful pride—self-promotion at the expense of others. Confidence is a wonderful virtue, too, but when confidence becomes a sinful self-confidence, we become smug and spiritually careless.

Clearly, there is nothing inherently wrong with zeal for the truth, a desire to succeed, or a sense of confidence. Those are all legitimate virtues. But even a virtue out of balance can become an impediment to spiritual health—just as truth out of balance can lead to serious error. A person out of balance is unsteady. Imbalance in one's personal character is a form of intemperance—a lack of self-control—and that is a sin in and of itself. So it is a very dangerous thing to push any point of truth or any character quality to an undue extreme.

That is what we see in the life of the younger disciple John. At various times he behaved like an extremist, a bigot, and a harsh, reckless man who was selfishly committed to his own narrow perception of truth. In his early years he was the most *unlikely* candidate to be remembered as the apostle of love.

But three years with Jesus began to transform a self-centered fanatic into a mature man of balance. Three years with Jesus moved this Son of Thunder toward becoming an apostle of love. At the very points where he was most imbalanced, Christ gave him equilibrium, and in the process John was transformed from a bigoted hothead into a loving, godly elder statesman for the early church.

HE LEARNED THE BALANCE OF LOVE AND TRUTH

John seems to have been committed to truth very early in life. From the beginning we see him as a spiritually aware man who sought to know and follow the truth. When we first encounter John (John 1:35–37), both he and Andrew are disciples of John the Baptist. But like Andrew, John without hesitation began following Jesus as soon as John the Baptist singled Him out as the true Messiah. It was not that they were fickle or disloyal to the Baptist. But John the Baptist himself said of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). John the disciple was interested in the truth; he hadn’t followed the Baptist in order to join a personality cult. Therefore he left John to follow Jesus as soon as John clearly identified Him as the Lamb of God.

John’s love of truth is evident in all his writings. He uses the Greek word for truth twenty-five times in his Gospel and twenty more times in his epistles. He wrote, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John 4). His strongest epithet for someone who claimed to be a believer while walking in darkness was to describe the person as “a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4; cf. 1:6, 8). No one in all of Scripture, except the Lord Himself, had more to say extolling the very concept of truth.

But sometimes in his younger years, John’s zeal for truth was lacking in love and compassion for people. He needed to learn the balance. The incident in Mark 9 where John forbade a man to cast out demons in Jesus’ name is a good illustration of this.

Again, this is the one place in the synoptic Gospels where John acts and speaks alone, so it is an important insight into his character. Here we see a rare glimpse of John without James and without Peter, speaking for himself. This is pure John. This same incident is also recorded in Luke 9, just before Luke’s account of the episode at the Samaritan village, when James and John wanted to call down fire. The similarity of the two occasions is striking. In both cases, John is displaying an appalling intolerance, elitism, and a lack of genuine love for people. In the incident with the Samaritans, James and John showed a lack



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of love for unbelievers. Here John is guilty of a similar kind of unloving spirit toward a fellow believer. He forbade the man to minister in Jesus' name "because he does not follow us" (Mark 9:38)—because he was not officially a member of the group.

This incident occurred shortly after Jesus' transfiguration. That glorious mountaintop experience, which was witnessed only by the inner circle of three (Peter, James, and John), actually sets the context for what happens later in the chapter. As always, it is vital that we understand the context.

In Mark 9:1, Jesus tells the disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power." Of course, that sounded to the disciples like a promise that the millennial kingdom would come in their lifetimes. Yet even today, more than nineteen hundred years after the death of the last disciple, we're still waiting for the establishment of the millennial kingdom on earth. So what was this promise about?

What happened immediately afterward clearly answers that question. Jesus was promising them a preview of coming attractions. Three of them would have the privilege of witnessing a brilliant foretaste of glory divine. They would see a glimpse of the glory and power of the coming kingdom. It happened less than a week after Jesus' promised that some of them would see the kingdom, present with power: "Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them" (v. 2).

Christ took His three most trusted, intimate friends and disciples to a mountain, where He pulled back the veil of His human flesh so that the shekinah glory—the very essence of the nature of the eternal God—was shining out in blazing brilliance. "His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them" (v. 3). Matthew says the sight was so shocking that the disciples fell on their faces (Matthew 17:6). No one on earth had experienced anything remotely like this since Moses caught a glimpse of God's back after being shielded in the cleft of a rock from the full display of His glory (Exodus 33:20–23). It was a transcendental experience, the likes of which the disciples had never even imagined.

To top that off, "Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus" (Mark 9:4). According to verse 6, the disciples were so frightened, they didn't know what to say.

Peter, in typical fashion, spoke anyway: "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (v. 5). Peter probably thought this appearance of Elijah and Moses signified the inauguration of the kingdom, and he was eager to make it permanent. He also seems to have been erroneously thinking of the three of them as a kind of triumvirate of equals, rather than realizing Christ was the one to whom Moses and Elijah had pointed, making Him superior to them. And so at that very moment ("While he was still speaking"—Matthew 17:5), "A cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!'" (Mark 9:7). Those were virtually the same words that had come from heaven at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11).

This was an amazing experience for Peter, James, and John to behold. They were being given a unique privilege, unparalleled in the annals of redemptive history. *But Mark 9:9 says, "As they came down from the mountain, [Jesus] commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen, till the Son of Man had risen from the dead."*

Can you imagine how difficult that would have been? They had just witnessed the most incredible thing anyone had ever seen, but they weren't allowed to tell anyone else about it. It was a formidable restraint to put upon them.

After all, the disciples—and these three in particular—were constantly arguing about who was the greatest among them. The subject seemed never very far from their thoughts (and they are about to give evidence of that just a few verses further into Mark's narrative). So it must have been exceedingly difficult for them not to use this experience as ammunition for their own case. They might have come down the mountain and said to the rest of the disciples, "Guys, guess where we have been? We were up there on the mountain and guess who showed up? Elijah and Moses!" They had been given a glimpse of the kingdom. They had seen things that never could be seen or known by anyone. They had a vivid preview of the glory to come. How difficult it must have been to keep this experience to themselves!



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It does seem to have fueled the debate about who was the greatest. Later in the chapter, Mark says they came to Capernaum. “And when He was in the house He asked them, ‘What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?’ ” (Mark 9:33). Jesus did not ask because He needed the *information*; He was looking for a *confession*. He knew exactly what they were talking about.

But they were embarrassed. So “they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest” (v. 34). It’s not hard to understand how the argument began. Peter, James, and John, brimming with confidence after their mountaintop experience, surely felt that now they had the inside track. They had seen things so wonderful that they were not permitted even to speak of them. And each one now was probably looking for some sign that he was the greatest of the three—possibly arguing among themselves about things like which one was standing closer to Jesus when He was trans-figured, reminding Peter that he was rebuked by a voice from heaven, and so on.

But when Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, they instantly grew silent. They realized they were wrong to debate these things. Their own consciences obviously were smiting them. That is why they couldn’t bear to admit what all the fuss was about.

Of course, Jesus knew. And He seized the opportunity to teach them once again. “He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.’ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me’ ” (vv. 35–37).

They had it backward. If they wanted to be first in the kingdom, they needed to be servants. If they wanted to be truly great, they needed to be more childlike. Instead of arguing and fighting with each other, instead of putting each other down, instead of rejecting each other and exalting themselves, they needed to take the role of a servant.

It was a lesson about love. “Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own” (1 Corinthians 13:4–5). Love is manifested in service to one another, not by lording it over each other.

This apparently cut John to the heart. It was a serious rebuke, and John obviously got the message. This is where we find the only time John speaks in the synoptic Gospels: “Now John answered Him, saying, ‘Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us’ ” (v. 38). This was sectarianism—rebuking a man for ministering in Jesus’ name just because he didn’t belong to the group. This shows the intolerance of John, a Son of Thunder. This was the narrowness, the ambition, the desire to have the status all for himself and not share it with anybody else—all of which too often characterized John in his younger years.

Here we see clearly that John was not a passive personality. He was aggressive. He was competitive. He condemned a man who was ministering in the name of Jesus, just because the man wasn’t part of the group. John had actually stepped in and tried to shut down this man’s ministry for no other reason than that.

I am inclined to think John confessed this to Jesus because he was convicted. I believe he was feeling the sting of Jesus’ rebuke, and he spoke these words as a penitent. Something in John was beginning to change, and he was beginning to see his own lack of love as undesirable. The fact that John made this confession was indicative of the transformation that was taking place in him. His conscience was bothering him. He was being tenderized. He had always been zealous and passionate for the truth, but now the Lord was teaching him to love. This is a major turning point in his life and thinking. He was beginning to understand the necessary equilibrium between love and truth.

The kingdom needs men who have courage, ambition, drive, passion, boldness, and a zeal for the truth. John certainly had all of those things. But to reach his full potential, he needed to balance those things with love. I think this episode was a critical rebuke that started to move him toward becoming the apostle of love he ultimately became.

John was always committed to truth, and there’s certainly nothing wrong with that, but it is not enough. Zeal for the truth must be balanced by love for people. Truth without love has no decency; it’s just brutality. On the other hand, love without truth has no character; it’s just hypocrisy.



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Many people are just as imbalanced as John was, only in the other direction. They place too much emphasis on the love side of the fulcrum. Some are merely ignorant; others are deceived; still others simply do not care about what is true. In each case, truth is missing, and all they are left with is error, clothed in a shallow, tolerant sentimentality. It is a poor substitute for genuine love. They talk a lot about love and tolerance, but they utterly lack any concern for the truth. **Therefore even the “love” they speak of is a tainted love. Real love “does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:6).**

On the other hand, there are many who have all their theological ducks in a row and know their doctrine but are unloving and self-exalting. They are left with truth as cold facts, stifling and unattractive. Their lack of love cripples the power of the truth they profess to revere.

The truly godly person must cultivate both virtues in equal proportions. If you could wish for anything in your sanctification, wish for that. If you pursue anything in the spiritual realm, pursue a perfect balance of truth and love. Know the truth, and uphold it in love.

In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul describes this balance of truth and love as the very pinnacle of spiritual maturity. He writes of “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (v. 13). He is speaking about full maturity, perfect Christlikeness. This is how he epitomizes the goal for which we ought to strive: “[That] speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head; Christ” (v. 15). This is what it means to share Christ’s likeness. He is the perfect expression of truth and the perfect expression of love. He is our model.

Manifesting both truth and love is possible only for the mature believer who has grown into the measure of the stature that belongs to the fullness of Christ. That is how true spiritual maturity is defined. The authentically Christlike person knows the truth and speaks it in love. He knows the truth as Christ has revealed it, and he loves as Christ loves.

As a mature apostle, John learned the lesson well. His brief second epistle offers vivid proof of how well he balanced the twin virtues of truth and love. Throughout that epistle, John repeatedly couples the concepts of love and truth. He writes, “To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth” (v. 1). He says, “I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth” (v. 4), and then he spends the first half of the epistle urging them to walk in love as well. He reminds them of the New Commandment, which of course is not really new, but simply restates the commandment we have heard from the beginning: “that we love one another” (v. 5).

So the first half of this short epistle is all about love. He urges this woman and her children not only to continue walking in truth, but also to remember that the sum and substance of God’s law is *love*. There is therefore no greater truth than love. The two are inseparable. After all, the First and Great Commandment is this: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). And the second is like unto it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 39). In other words, love is what real truth is ultimately all about.

But John balances that emphasis on love in the second half of the epistle by urging this woman not to compromise her love by receiving and blessing false teachers who undermine the truth. Genuine love is not some saccharine sentiment that disregards the truth and tolerates everything:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (vv. 7–11)

John is no longer calling down fire from heaven against the enemies of truth, but he cautions this lady not to go to the other extreme, either. She is not to open her home or even bestow a verbal blessing on people who make a living twisting and opposing the truth.

Of course, the apostle is not urging this woman to be unkind or abusive to anyone. We are commanded to do good to those who persecute us, be kind to those who hate us, bless those who oppose us, and pray



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for those who despitefully use us (Luke 6:27–28). But our blessing on our enemies must stop short of encouraging or assisting a false teacher who is corrupting the gospel.

Love and truth must be maintained in perfect balance. Truth is never to be abandoned in the name of love. But love is not to be deposed in the name of truth. That is what John learned from Christ, and it gave him the balance he so desperately needed.

HE LEARNED THE BALANCE OF AMBITION AND HUMILITY

In his youth, John had some ambitious plans for himself. It's not inherently wrong to aspire to have influence or to desire success. But it is wrong to have selfish motives, as John apparently did. And it is especially wrong to be ambitious without also being humble.

Here is another important balance that must be struck, or else a virtue turns into a vice. Ambition without humility becomes egotism, or even megalomania.

In Mark 10, one chapter after the incident where John rebuked a man who was ministering in Jesus' name, we find Mark's description of how James and John approached Jesus with their request to be seated on His right and left in the kingdom. Ironically, Jesus had just reiterated the importance of humility. In Mark 10:31, He told them, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first." (Remember, this was virtually the same statement that provoked John's earlier confession in Mark 9. There, Jesus had set a child in their midst as an object lesson about humility and told them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all"—Mark 9:35.) Jesus was simply reiterating the same lesson He had taught them over and over about humility.

Nonetheless, just a few verses later (10:35–37), Mark records that James and John came to Jesus with their infamous request for the chief thrones. In our study of the apostle James, we looked at Matthew's account of this incident, and we learned that James and John actually enlisted their mother to intercede for them. Here we discover that they were seeking this favor secretly, because the other disciples learned of it afterward (v. 41).

Coming as it did on the heels of so many admonitions from Jesus about humility, the brothers' request shows amazing audacity. It reveals how utterly devoid of true humility they were.

Again, there is nothing wrong with ambition. In fact, there was nothing intrinsically wrong with James and John's desire to sit next to Jesus in the kingdom. Who would not desire that? The other disciples certainly desired it, and that is why they were displeased with James and John. Jesus did not rebuke them for that desire per se.

Their error was in desiring *to obtain* the position more than they desired *to be worthy* of such a position. Their ambition was untempered by humility. And Jesus had repeatedly made clear that the highest positions in the kingdom are reserved for the most humble saints on earth. Notice His response in verses 42–45:

Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Those who want to be great must first learn to be humble. Christ Himself was the perfection of true humility. Furthermore, His kingdom is advanced by humble service, not by politics, status, power, or dominion. This was Jesus' whole point when He set the child in the midst of the disciples and talked to them about the childlikeness of the true believer. Elsewhere, He had also told them, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). Even before that, He had said,

When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, "Give



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place to this man,” and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, “Friend, go up higher.” Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 14:8–11)

Again and again, Christ had emphasized this truth: If you want to be great in the kingdom, you must become the servant of all.

It is astonishing how little this truth penetrated the disciples’ consciousness, even after three years with Jesus. But on the final night of His earthly ministry, not one of them had the humility to pick up the towel and washbasin and perform the task of a servant (John 13:1–17). So Jesus did it Himself.

John *did* eventually learn the balance between ambition and humility. In fact, humility is one of the great virtues that comes through in his writings.

Throughout John’s Gospel, for instance, he never once mentions his own name. (The only “John” who is mentioned by name in the Gospel of John is John the Baptist.) The apostle John refuses to speak of himself in reference to himself. Instead, he speaks of himself in reference to Jesus. He never paints himself in the foreground as a hero, but uses every reference to himself to honor Christ. Rather than write his name, which might focus attention on him, he refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 20:2; 21:7, 20), giving glory to Jesus for having loved such a man. In fact, he seems utterly in awe of the marvel that Christ loved him. Of course, according to John 13:1–2, Jesus loved *all* His apostles to perfection. But it seems there was a unique way in which John gripped this reality, and he was humbled by it.

In fact, it is John’s Gospel alone that records in detail Jesus’ act of washing the disciples’ feet. It is clear that Jesus’ own humility on the night of His betrayal made a lasting impression on John.

John’s humility also comes through in the gentle way he appeals to his readers in every one of his epistles. He calls them “little children,” “beloved”—and he includes himself as a brother and fellow child of God (cf. 1 John 3:2). There’s a tenderness and compassion in those expressions that shows his humility. His last contribution to the canon was the book of Revelation, where he describes himself as “your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:9). Even though he was the last remaining apostle and the patriarch of the church, we never find him lording it over anyone.

Somewhere along the line, John’s ambition found balance in humility. John himself was mellowed—although he remained courageous, confident, bold, and passionate.

HE LEARNED THE BALANCE OF SUFFERING AND GLORY

As noted, in his early years, the apostle John had a thirst for glory and an aversion to suffering. His thirst for glory is seen in his desire for the chief throne. His aversion to suffering is seen in the fact that he and the other apostles forsook Jesus and fled on the night of His arrest (Mark 14:20).

Both desires are perfectly understandable. After all, John had seen Jesus’ glory firsthand on the Mount of Transfiguration, and he treasured Jesus’ promise that he would share that glory (Matthew 19:28–29). How could he *not* desire such a blessing? On the other hand, no one but a madman enjoys suffering.

There was nothing inherently sinful about John’s desire to participate in the glory of Jesus’ eternal kingdom. Christ had promised him a throne and an inheritance in glory. Moreover, it is my conviction that when we see Christ’s glory fully unveiled we will finally understand why the glory of Christ is the greatest reward of all in heaven. One glimpse of Jesus in the fullness of His glory will be worth all the pain and sorrow and suffering we have endured here on earth (cf. Psalm 17:15; 1 John 3:2). Participation in Christ’s glory is therefore a fitting desire for every child of God.

But if we desire to participate in heavenly glory, we must also be willing to partake of earthly sufferings. This was the apostle Paul’s desire: “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the



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fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:10). Paul wasn’t saying he had a masochistic lust for pain; he was simply recognizing that glory and suffering are inseparable. Those who desire the reward of glory must be willing to endure the suffering.

Suffering is the price of glory. We are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:17). Jesus taught this principle again and again. “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24–25). “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24–25).

Suffering is the prelude to glory. Our suffering as believers is the assurance of the glory that is yet to come (1 Peter 1:6–7). And “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). Meanwhile, those who thirst for glory must balance that desire with a willingness to suffer.

All the disciples needed to learn this. Remember, they *all* wanted the chief seats in glory. But Jesus said there is a price for those seats. Not only are those seats reserved for the humble, but those who sit in those seats will first be prepared for the place of honor by enduring the humility of suffering. That is why Jesus told James and John that before they would receive any throne at all, they would be required to “drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with” (Mark 10:38).

How eagerly and how naively James and John assured the Lord that they would be able to drink of the cup He would drink and be baptized with a baptism of suffering! “They said to Him, ‘We are able’ ” (v. 39). At that moment they had no real clue what they were volunteering for. They were like Peter, boasting that they would follow Jesus to the death—but when faced with the opportunity, they all forsook Him and fled.

Thankfully, Christ does not regard such failures as final. All eleven of the disciples fled on the night of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest. But every one of them was recovered, and every one of them ultimately learned to suffer willingly for Christ’s sake.

In fact, all of them except John suffered and ultimately died for the faith. They were martyred one by one in the prime of life. John was the only disciple who lived to old age. But he suffered, too, in ways the others did not. He was still enduring earthly anguish and persecution long after the others were already in glory.

On the night of Jesus’ arrest, John probably began to understand the bitterness of the cup he would have to drink. We know from his account of Jesus’ trial that he and Peter followed Jesus to the house of the high priest (John 18:15). There he watched as Jesus was bound and beaten. As far as we know, John was the only disciple who was an actual eyewitness to Jesus’ crucifixion. He was standing close enough to the cross for Jesus to see him (John 19:26). He probably watched as the Roman soldiers drove in the nails. He was there when a soldier finally pierced his Lord’s side with a spear. And perhaps as he watched he remembered that he had agreed to partake of this same baptism. If so, he surely realized then and there how awful the cup was he had so easily volunteered to drink!

When John’s brother James became the church’s first martyr, John bore the loss in a more personal way than the others. As each of the other disciples was martyred one by one, John suffered the grief and pain of additional loss. These were his friends and companions. Soon he alone was left. In some ways, that may have been the most painful suffering of all.

Virtually all reliable sources in early church history attest to the fact that John became the pastor of the church the apostle Paul had founded at Ephesus. From there, during a great persecution of the church under the Roman Emperor Domitian (brother and successor of Titus, who destroyed Jerusalem), John was banished to a prison community on Patmos, one of the small Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea off the west coast of modern Turkey. He lived in a cave there. It was while there that he received and recorded the apocalyptic visions described in the book of Revelation (cf. Revelation 1:9). I have been to the cave in which he is thought to have lived and in which he is believed to have written the Apocalypse. It was a harsh



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environment for an aged man. He was cut off from those whom he loved, treated with cruelty and reproach, and made to sleep on a stone slab with a rock for a pillow as the years passed slowly.

But John learned to bear suffering willingly. There is no complaint about his sufferings anywhere in his epistles or the book of Revelation. It is certain that he wrote Revelation under the most extreme kind of hardship and deprivation. But he makes scant mention of his difficulties, referring to himself as “both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:9). Notice that in the same breath he mentioned “tribulation,” he speaks of the patience that enabled him to bear his sufferings willingly. He was looking forward calmly to the day when he would partake in the promised glory of the kingdom. That is the right balance and a healthy perspective. He had learned to look beyond his earthly sufferings in anticipation of the heavenly glory.

John got the message. He learned the lessons. He grasped the character of Christ in a powerful way. And he became a choice human model of what righteous, Christlike character ought to be.

Powerful proof of this is seen in a vignette from the cross. Remember, John is the only one of the apostles whom the biblical record places as an eyewitness to the crucifixion. John himself describes the scene as Jesus looked down from the cross and saw His mother, Mary, along with her sister, another Mary (wife of Clopas), Mary Magdalene, and John (John 19:25). John writes, “When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home” (vv. 26–27).

Obviously, John had learned the lessons he needed to learn. He had learned to be a humble, loving servant—or else Jesus would not have given him the care of His own mother. He told Peter, “Feed My sheep” (John 21:17). He told John, “Care for My mother.” Several witnesses in early church history record that John never left Jerusalem and never left the care of Mary until she died.

John reminds me of many seminary graduates whom I have known, including myself as a younger man. I recall when I came out of seminary. I was loaded to the gills with truth but somewhat short on patience. It was a strong temptation to come blasting into the church, dump the truth on everyone, and expect an immediate response. I needed to learn patience, tolerance, mercy, grace, forgiveness, tenderness, compassion—all the characteristics of love. It is wonderful to be bold and thunderous, but love is the necessary balance. John is a superb model for such young men.

It may seem amazing that Jesus loved a man who wanted to burn up the Samaritans. He loved a man who was obsessed with status and position. He loved a man who forsook Him and fled rather than suffer for His sake. But in loving John, Jesus transformed him into a different man—a man who modeled the same kind of love Jesus had shown him.

We noted earlier that John used the word *truth* some forty-five times in his Gospel and epistles. But it is interesting that he also used the word *love* more than eighty times. Clearly, he learned the balance Christ taught Him. He learned to love others as the Lord had loved him. Love became the anchor and centerpiece of the truth he was most concerned with.

In fact, John’s theology is best described as a theology of love. He taught that God is a God of love, that God loved His own Son, that God loved the world, that God is loved by Christ, that Christ loved His disciples, that Christ’s disciples loved Him, that all men should love Christ, that we should love one another, and that love fulfills the law. Love was a critical part of every element of John’s teaching. It was the dominant theme of his theology.

And yet his love never slid into indulgent sentimentality. To the very end of his life John was still a thunderous defender of the truth. He lost none of his intolerance for lies. In his epistles, written near the end of his life, he was still thundering out against errant Christologies, against anti-Christian deceptions, against sin, and against immorality. He was in that sense a Son of Thunder to the end. I think the Lord knew that the most powerful advocate of love needed to be a man who never compromised the truth.

Another favorite word of John’s was *witness*. He used it nearly seventy times. He refers to the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of Scripture, the witness of the Father, the witness of Christ, the witness of



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the miracles, the witness of the Holy Spirit, and the witness of the apostles. In each case, these were witnesses to the *truth*. So his love for the truth remained undiminished.

In fact, I am convinced John leaned on Jesus' shoulder (John 13:3), not only because he enjoyed the pure love his Lord gave him, but also because he wanted to hear every word of truth that came out of the mouth of Christ.

John died, by most accounts, around A.D. 98, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. Jerome says in his commentary on Galatians that the aged apostle John was so frail in his final days at Ephesus that he had to be carried into the church. One phrase was constantly on his lips: "My little children, love one another." Asked why he always said this, he replied, "It is the Lord's command, and if this alone be done, it is enough."²

Thus the fishermen of Galilee—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—became fishers of men on a tremendous scale, gathering souls into the church. In a sense, they are still casting their nets into the sea of the world by their testimony in the Gospels and their epistles. They are still bringing multitudes of people to Christ. Although they were common men, theirs was an uncommon calling.²

JOHN THE APOSTLE (Ιωάννης, *Iōannēs*). One of the 12 apostles of Jesus. A fisherman at the Sea of Galilee who was called by Jesus and became a disciple and an apostle, along with his brother James. Possibly the author of the Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation.

John in the Gospels

John appears in each of the lists of disciples in the New Testament (Matt 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:13). He was part of Jesus' inner circle (along with Peter and James) that followed Him on important occasions, including:

- The raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37)
- The transfiguration (Mark 9:2)
- The agony in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:37)

John may have been younger than his brother James, since he is usually mentioned after James. Together with their father, John and James were fishermen when Jesus called them. According to Mark, Jesus gave the two brothers the Aramaic surname Boanerges, translated as "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). The name may be linked to their fiery temperaments (Mark 9:38–41; Luke 9:51–56). Culpepper interprets the name as a sign of what they could become: mighty witnesses and voices from heaven (Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee*, 39–40, 50). According to Mark, the only other person to receive a new name from Jesus is Simon, who is given the name Peter.

John rarely speaks in the Gospels. During the only time when he is alone with Jesus, he says: "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us" (Mark 9:38 NIV; a shorter version is found in Luke 9:49). Jesus then corrects John and explains that the use of his name is not restricted to the disciples. This scene may be an example of John's intolerance (Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee*, 41–43).

The Beloved Disciple

John is traditionally identified as the "beloved disciple" in the Gospel of John. Although this is uncertain, the two are both in Jesus' closest circle and are companions of Peter.

John is never explicitly named in the Gospel of John. He is indirectly mentioned in John 21:2, which says that "the sons of Zebedee" were together with Peter and some of the other disciples at the lake of Tiberias (i.e., the Sea of Galilee). However, one unnamed disciple is presented as closest to Jesus:

² MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2002). *Twelve ordinary men: how the Master shaped his disciples for greatness, and what He wants to do with you* (pp. 95–117). Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group.



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- He leans on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper (John 13:23)
- He acts as an intermediary between Peter and Jesus (John 13:24–25)
- He is entrusted with the care of Jesus' mother (John 19:26–27)
- He reaches the empty tomb before any other disciple (John 20:4)
- He is the first to believe in the resurrection (John 20:8)
- He recognizes the risen Lord and identifies him for Peter (John 21:7)

He is called “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (e.g., in John 21:20). This beloved disciple is Peter’s companion. He is sometimes called “the other disciple” (John 18:15; 20:2).

Other suggestions for the identity of the beloved disciple include Lazarus, Thomas, John Mark, or Matthias. The beloved disciple is portrayed both as an individual and as a symbolic figure. According to John 21:24, the beloved disciple is identified as the author of the Gospel of John (see the events leading up to John 21:24 in John 21:20–23).

John in Acts and the Pauline Literature

John only appears in a few scenes in the early part of Acts. He is almost always mentioned together with Peter (the exception is when the martyrdom of James is mentioned, in Acts 12:2), and acts as Peter’s silent companion in several scenes, including:

- The healing of the crippled man in the temple (Acts 3:1–10)
- The hearing before the council (Acts 4:1–22)
- The missionary work in Samaria (Acts 8:14–25)

John is not mentioned among the apostles that are present at the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). However, Paul mentions John as an important part of the early Jesus movement: “James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised” (Gal 2:9).

Authorship of the Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation

The author of Revelation presents himself as “John,” both in the opening verses and at the end (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), although he does not claim to be an apostle. Since he received a revelation from Jesus Christ, he is often called “John the seer.”

The author of 1 John is unnamed, though early church tradition associated it with John the apostle (see, e.g., Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.16.5; Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 9; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.17). The author of 2 John and 3 John calls himself “the elder” (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1), which indicates that the two books were likely written by the same author. But there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that “the elder” composed 1 John. Likewise, we cannot conclude that any of the other writings ascribed to John share authorship—they could all be written by different people named John.

The church father Irenaeus, ca. AD 185, asserted that John the apostle wrote the Gospel of John (*Adversus Haereses* 2.22.5; 3.1.1). The fourth-century church historian Eusebius differentiates between John the apostle and John the elder (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.1–7). He identifies the apostle as the writer of the Gospel of John and says that if Revelation was not written by the apostle then it was probably written by the elder. Eusebius bases his statement on a difficult passage from the early second-century bishop Papias (only preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3–4). However, no other ancient author makes this distinction. Also, the cited passage from Papias need not be interpreted as referring to two separate people named John, so Eusebius’ statement is not conclusive evidence.

The Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation may have also originated in a Johannine community that preserved tradition about John. For further information, see this article: Johannine Literature.

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DAN NÄSSELQVIST

JOHN THE APOSTLE, CRITICAL ISSUES (Ιωάννης, *Iōannēs*).

The Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation provide internal biblical evidence about John the Apostle. However, these biblical books show differences and similarities in style, vocabulary, and theology that lead to varied conclusions about the identity of the author. There were many people named John in first-century church leadership, which further complicates that matter. The current scholarly debates about the identity of John the Apostle are particularly informed by three factors:

1. the identity of the Beloved Disciple
2. whether there were one or multiple Johns in early church writings
3. whether John of Ephesus was martyred or whether he lived a long life followed by a non-violent death

The Identity of the Beloved Disciple

Three recent proposals for the identity of the Beloved Disciple affect our understanding of the identity of John the Apostle. Each proposal attempts to honor the early church's nearly universal understanding that the Beloved Disciple was John the Apostle, son of Zebedee, and author of the Gospel of John. At the same time, each proposal discusses and incorporates the work of modern scholarship, which widely disputes the early church's consensus.

1. Bauckham argues that the Gospels—including the Gospel of John—offer reliable eyewitness testimony. He proposes that the Beloved Disciple, the eyewitness source for the Gospel of John, is not John the Apostle, but rather John the Elder, a disciple of Jesus who was not one of the Twelve and not the son of Zebedee (Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 419–22).
2. Michaels argues that the longstanding tradition that the Beloved Disciple is John the Apostle, son of Zebedee, “deserves the utmost respect” (Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 24). Nevertheless, he concludes that the anonymity of the Beloved Disciple should be maintained. He notes that the author of the Gospel of John remains unnamed, as do many of the other characters in the Gospel, such as the woman at the well (John 4:4–42), the man healed at the pool (John 5:1–15), and the man born blind (John 9:1–38; Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 24). Michaels further proposes that the Gospel of John might be attributed to John not because of authorship, but because John the Baptist is prominent in the first chapters (Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 16–7).
3. Keener argues that the Beloved Disciple is the author of the Gospel of John and should most likely be identified with John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee. Yet Keener qualifies this assessment by noting that if the author is not John the Apostle, he must be a member of a Johannine community who incorporates eyewitness tradition from John the Apostle. Either way, in Keener’s view, John the Apostle, son of Zebedee, is the source of the eyewitness testimony in the Gospel (Keener, *John*, 81–115).

Early Church Witness: How Many Johns?

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius interprets Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis (ca. AD 100–120), as having referred to two different Johns: John the Apostle, who is deceased, and John the Elder, who was living at the time Papias wrote (ca. AD 120–30; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.5–7). There are two main scholarly approaches to understanding Eusebius’ interpretation of Papias’ statements:



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1. Those in favor of Eusebius' interpretation that Papias refers to two different Johns
2. Those who oppose Eusebius' interpretation and argue that Papias refers to one John

Bauckham builds a case in favor of Eusebius' interpretation that Papias refers to two people named John. Bauckham applies this notion of two distinct Johns to all second-century church writings about John, especially the comments of Polycrates and Irenaeus. For example, he reads Irenaeus' comments about "the disciple of the Lord" or "the author of the Gospel" as referring to someone besides John the Apostle, son of Zebedee. Bauckham suggests that the early church consistently attests to the existence of more than one John (Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 412–469).

In contrast, Keener argues against Eusebius' interpretation of Papias' statements, holding that Papias' two mentions of John refer to the same person (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4). In Keener's view, Papias refers to John the Apostle, one of the Twelve. In his view, the present tense verb (*λέγουσιν, legousin*) preceding Papias' second mention of John indicates that John the Apostle was still living at the time Papias wrote. Keener further notes that Papias uses the designation "elder" (*πρεσβύτερος, presbyteros*) to describe both groups that include a mention of John, and that the first group clearly consists of apostles named in the Gospel of John.

Keener suggests that Eusebius may have had an agenda that dictates his preference for a second John. In his further comments, Eusebius hints that the other John may be the author of Revelation, whose theology he believed was corrupted by Chiliasm (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.12). Keener suggests that if the apostolic authority of Revelation could be drawn into question, then its canonicity would also be dubious. Ultimately, Keener concludes that Eusebius' own evidence defeats his argument and that Papias bears witness to one John: John the Elder, who was John the Apostle (Keener, *John*, 95–98).

The Death of John the Apostle

The third area of debate centers on the mode of John's death—specifically, whether he was martyred in the mid- to late-first century or whether he lived a long life before dying a peaceful death. The second-century witnesses Irenaeus and Tertullian promote the latter, suggesting that, after his exile to Patmos, John the Apostle resided for many years in Ephesus and died a peaceful death. However, González and Weidmann caution that the second-century church's concern with proving apostolic origins for one's ministry may skew such claims (González, *Story of Christianity Vol. 1*, 29; Weidmann, *Polycarp and John*, 126–131).

The mode of John's death is of particular concern with regard to Jesus' prophecy that the sons of Zebedee (James and John) will drink from the same cup and undergo the same baptism as He would—a metaphorical reference to Jesus' violent death (Mark 10:35–40; Matt 20:20–23). It also relates to a definition of apostleship that includes undergoing the same sufferings of Christ. James was killed for his faith by Herod Agrippa in the early AD 40s (Acts 12:1–3), and his death aligns with both Jesus' prophecy and this definition of apostleship. It is unclear whether John was killed for his faith.

Early Dates

Several scholars propose early dates for John, son of Zebedee's, death:

- Witherington notes John, son of Zebedee, apparently disappears suddenly from the New Testament after his appearances with Peter in Acts (Acts 8:4–25). He points out that John is not at the council of the leaders in Acts 15, and Paul does not mention John when he refers to other apostles in 1 Cor 1:10–17 or 9:1–6 (Witherington, "The Martyrdom," 26).
- M.-É. Boismard suggests that John, son of Zebedee, died a martyr in the early AD 40s, as did James (Boismard, *Le Martyre*, 77). However, if this is the case, it is unclear why John's death was not noted in Acts along with James'.
- Witherington argues that Acts 26:10 implicates Paul in the deaths of some apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1–3), one of whom may have been John, son of Zebedee, as early as the AD 30s (Witherington,



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“The Martyrdom,” 26). However, it is unclear how John could welcome Paul to Jerusalem after his conversion if Paul was responsible for John’s death (Gal 2:9). It is possible that the John who welcomed Paul in Galatians is not the son of Zebedee.

The Harris Fragments

Weidmann argues that the Harris Fragments on Polycarp offer unique insight into reconciling John’s martyrdom and his reported long life and natural death in that:

- They support the second-century church tradition that John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, lived a long life in Ephesus after suffering exile on Patmos, and died a peaceful death.
- They account for the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy about the martyr’s death that John the son of Zebedee would die.

Polycarp (ca. AD 69–150) was a disciple of the Apostle John and, according to Tertullian, was ordained Bishop of Smyrna by John (Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 32.2). The Harris Fragments indicate that Polycarp, who was burned at the stake in his old age, had the privilege of dying as a martyr in place of the Apostle John (Weidmann, *Polycarp and John*, 137–141).

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TRACEE D. HACKEL³

JOHANNINE LITERATURE The books of the New Testament attributed to John, including the Gospel of John, the letters of 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John, and sometimes the book of Revelation.

Authorship

Traditional View

Traditionally, the Johannine literature has been attributed to John the apostle. Polycarp is perhaps the earliest witness to John’s authorship of the Gospel of John. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp was a disciple of John the apostle. Papias also thought the apostle John wrote the gospel, although his work is only known through quotations in Eusebius and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian both wrote that John was the author of the Fourth Gospel. According to Clement, John’s disciples urged him to compose a “spiritual” gospel, and his Gospel was the last of those written.

Modern Theories

In the 20th century the traditional view that John the apostle composed the Johannine literature came under scrutiny. For example, Hengel argued that the “John the Elder” mentioned in the early traditions is different from John, the son of Zebedee. In his view, John the Elder was the “beloved disciple” mentioned in the Gospel of John and the author of the Fourth Gospel. As support, Hengel argued that the author of the Gospel of John apparently was not familiar with Judaean geography and was thus likely not Galilean.

³ Hackel, T. D. (2016). *John the Apostle, Critical Issues*. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.



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Hengel further noted that while 2 John, 3 John, and Papias use the term “elder,” this term is not used elsewhere in reference to John, the son of Zebedee. Hengel believes this “John the elder” was also the author of the book of Revelation (see Hengel, *The Johannine Question*).

Modern theories for the authorship of Johannine literature fall into two broad categories:

1. The texts were composed by a single author.
2. The texts were composed by different authors or a community of Christians known as the Johannine community.

A Single Author. Several scholars argue that the Johannine texts were written by a single author. For example:

- In the early 20th century, Streeter argued that the similarities between the Gospel of John and the Johannine letters are so striking that “the burden of proof lies with the person who would deny their common authorship” (Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, 460).
- Based on a survey of the Johannine texts’ vocabulary, stock phrases, and style, Köstenberger concludes that the apostle John was the author of both the Gospel of John and the Johannine letters (Kostenberger, *Theology*, 89).
- Rainbow argues that there is “little reason to be swayed by the prevalence of excessive caution” with respect to the traditional authorship of the Gospel and letters of John (Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 50).

Johannine Community. Other scholars have suggested that the Gospel of John and the Johannine letters were written by different authors or a community of the Apostle John’s disciples. For example, Brown argued that the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine letters were written by two different people and reflect different circumstances (Brown, *Epistles*, 30). He developed a complex “Johannine community” hypothesis, which proposes:

- Rather than a single author, these documents reflect the inspiration and tradition of the Apostle John handed down through a group of disciples.
- The followers of the Apostle John published the final version of the Gospel at Ephesus after his death, ca. AD 85.
- The Apostle John’s disciples may or may not have been involved in the writing of the (later) letters of John (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxii).

According to Brown, the Gospel of John was written about AD 90, after which the community became increasingly divided and experienced a schism before 1 John was written (Brown, *Epistles*, 69). The Johannine letters thus reflect a division in the Johannine community along theological lines. For example, the “antichrists” in 1 John 2:18–25 reflect a breakaway from the main Johannine community.

While this hypothetical “community” has been a popular solution to the authorship question, many scholars view it as too speculative. For example, Rainbow argues that the hypothesis is “showing signs of strain” because it rests on a “tissue of assumptions, none of which is proven” (Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 35). Kostenberger chronicles the scholarly abandonment of the Johannine community since 1990 (Kostenberger, *Theology*, 56–60). Despite the decay of the Johannine community hypothesis, many scholars treat the Gospel and the letters as having two separate authors.

Revelation and the Johannine Literature

The book of Revelation, which is sometimes categorized as a Johannine text, is the only one of the five books that specifically names John (Rev 1:4). Yet this text, which is also called the Apocalypse of John, is often excluded from the body of Johannine literature because of the different style and theology between it and the Gospel of John. Kostenberger excludes it from his *Theology of John’s Gospel*, but Pate and Rainbow include it in their surveys (see Pate, *Writings*; Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*). Smalley



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thinks “a case can be made out for the fundamentally ‘Johannine’ character of the Apocalypse.” He argues that even if the book does not come from the same author, “they both came from the same Christian circle” (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxii).

Similarities between the Gospel of John and Revelation that may indicate that the books came from the same community include (Smalley, “John’s Revelation,” 549–71):

- the use of the term “Word” or “Logos” ($\lambda\omega\gammao\varsigma$, *logos*) to refer to Jesus Christ (John 1:1; Rev 19:13);
- a “Replacement of the temple” theme (John 4:21; Rev 21:22);
- the proximity of Patmos and Ephesus.

However, the Gospel of John is often considered as portraying a “realized eschatology,” while Revelation portrays a vivid future eschatology. Carson, Moo, and Morris argue that these contrasts may be “overdrawn and incapable of proving much” (Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 470).

Selected Resources for Further Study

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PHILLIP J. LONG⁴

1, 2, and 3 John

Toward the end of the first century, some Christians began drifting away from the truth about Christ. They were losing touch with those who had known Jesus in the flesh as the founders of the church began to die off. They were also being seduced by competing doctrines, especially early forms of gnosticism (see 1 John 5:20). As a result, second- and third-generation believers began to grow cold in their love for each other and lukewarm in their commitment to the truth. They had, as the Lord put it to the Ephesians, “left [their] first love” (Rev. 2:4).

One response to this trend was the writing of 1, 2, and 3 John. These letters call Christians back to the basics—the truth about Christ and the love of Christ. For that reason, they are crucial for Christians today.

⁴ Long, P. J. (2016). *Johannine Literature*. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.



Back to
the basics.

◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆
CONTENTS

Some Basics of Witness (1 John 1:1-10)

What exactly does it mean to "witness"? John provides several basics of communicating Christ to others.

Rules That Lead to Joy (2:3-6)

We can be thankful that God has established rules and standards. Without such boundaries, we would not experience freedom but chaos.

Eternal Life (2:25)

From beauty creams to vitamins to aerobics, many people today are looking for a "fountain of youth." John offers the one way that we can actually do something about prolonging real life.

Sinless Perfection? (3:6)

Most followers of Christ would agree that they should pursue the highest moral integrity that they can. But does John raise that standard to the point of sinless perfection?

Murder on the Job (3:11-13)

Attitudes on the job are a serious matter! Just as Cain murdered his brother, it's possible to "murder" one's coworkers in mind and heart simply by begrudging their conscientious efforts.

Tough-minded Believers (4:1)

Christianity has rightly been characterized as a religion of love, but it's important not to take that emphasis to an unhealthy extreme. God never asks us to put our brains in neutral when it comes to matters of faith.

Love Is More than Enthusiasm (5:1-3)

People say they "love" all kinds of things. So what does "love" mean? Scripture defines the term for us by describing God's love.

Hospitality and Discernment (2 John 7-11)

Do you know the basics of what the Bible teaches? Can you detect error in the statements of others? Do you know how to lovingly disagree on major issues of faith and truth?

Prosperity (3 John 2)

John prayed for God to give physical and material help to a man named Gaius. Should believers today ask God for the same things?

TOUGH LOVE

John is often described as the "apostle of love" and 1, 2, and 3 John as the "love letters" of the New Testament. But these writings are far from mere sentimentalism. They're about "tough love," love that shoots straight, even if it hurts, because it cares for others and wishes them the best.

The tone of these letters has the feeling of an older believer pleading with a younger.

Nine times in

1 John the writer addresses his readers as his "little children" and nine times among the three letters as "beloved." Likewise, he refers to himself as "the elder" (2 John 1, 3 John 1).



His writing style is reflective and loosely structured, and he uses some of the simplest Greek in the New Testament.

One of the most notable features of 1 John in particular is the way in which the writer presents his material in formulaic expressions (for example 1 John 2:12–14; 5:6–8). These may be the beginnings of creedal statements and catechisms that package truth in a memorable way so as to lock it into the reader's thinking.

Such a strategy would be important in order to counter false teachers who denied Jesus' physical reality. Claiming to have special knowledge, they taught that God could not have become flesh. No wonder John opens his first letter with the powerful declaration, "That ... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life ... that which we have seen and heard we declare to you" (1:1, 3). Here was a man—perhaps the last man in the early church—who had actually walked and talked with Jesus.

How does one discern genuine Christianity? John claims that there is a core truth to believe—that Jesus has come in the flesh—and that the practice of love and righteousness is the test of whether one truly believes in (and follows) that Jesus. His message is similar to Paul's word to the Ephesians that true spirituality involves "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

Two Short Letters with a Powerful Message

Perhaps because they are so brief, 2 and 3 John are often overlooked by Bible readers. Yet their message is crucial. Second John encourages believers to test ideas and spiritual claims against the litmus test of Christology: what do they say about Jesus? Deceivers are coming, the author warns, and God's people need to be on guard against deception. As believers today confront an onslaught of religious systems in a pluralistic society, John's warning remains extremely relevant.

Third John confronts disloyalty in the church. The hospitable and faithful Gaius contrasts with domineering Diotrephes, "who loves to have ... preeminence" (3 John 9). Diotrephes apparently felt no need of the apostles or their doctrine. Instead, he had become self-sufficient and, in fact, opposed to the church's leaders. John responds to this problem in an interesting way. He sets descriptions of Gaius and Diotrephes side by side and then simply encourages the rest of his readers to "imitate ... what is good" (3 John 11). Apparently he felt confident that the group would know which man was worthy of imitation. ♦

AUTHOR AND SETTING

The three letters known as 1, 2, and 3 John are generally believed to have been written by the same person. Traditionally this writer has been understood to be John the apostle of Jesus. It is worth noting, however, that one early church historian identified the author as another John, called the Elder (compare 2 John 1; 3 John 1), a disciple of John the apostle in Ephesus. It is possible that John the Elder actually wrote 1, 2, and 3 John either for or under the supervision of John the apostle.

The exact dates of writing have not been determined, but all three letters were probably produced toward the close of the first century A.D. ♦

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just **1 John 1:9**
to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from
all unrighteousness."

"My little children, let us not love in word or **1 John 3:18**
in tongue, but in deed and in truth."



Who Are The Apostles? Week #3: Introducing John, The Evangelist

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of **1 John 4:7**
God; and everyone who loves is born of God
and knows God."

"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that **1 John 4:10**
He loved us."

"Perfect love casts out fear." **1 John 4:18**

"And this is the victory that has overcome the **1 John 5:4**
world—our faith."

"He who has the Son has life; he who does not **1 John 5:12**
have the Son of God does not have life."

Although modern Christians regard John as the "apostle of love," he didn't start out as a perfect model of charity. To find out about the background of this man who wrote much of the New Testament, see "John—The Apostle of Love" and John's personality profile at the Introduction to John⁵

♦A Gospel for the Thinking Person♦

The first-century world was a swirl of ideas, values, and symbols, not unlike our own. John's is a Gospel that is especially good for the thinking person. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which present comprehensive and similar ("synoptic") overviews of the Lord's life, John is a highly stylized arrangement of carefully selected events and words, all directed toward one major purpose: that readers might find life by believing in Jesus as the Christ. John's goal is not belief for its own sake, but belief in order to have life (John 20:30–31).

For that reason, this book is vitally important for modern-day Christians. We tend to apply our faith only to certain private and "religious" settings, but leave it behind when we go into the public arena. The message of John cuts through that way of thinking and living. Jesus is our bridge between that which is eternal, spiritual, and supernatural, and the everyday, human, natural world. He is the divine Word of God, yet He became human and lived our experience (1:1, 14).

How can our faith become relevant to the day-to-day circumstances we face? In the Gospel of John, Jesus shows us. He lived the message that He preached. And as we come to know Him and follow Him, we can experience the life that He gives.

John

**Christ is the divine
Word of God, yet
He became human.**



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INDIVIDUALS ENCOUNTER CHRIST
Andrew (1:40)

The Divine Partnership (1:3)

⁵ *Word in life study Bible*. (1996). (electronic ed., 1 Jn 1:1). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.



Who Are The Apostles? Week #3: Introducing John, The Evangelist

After spending a day with Jesus, this follower of John the Baptist goes home and tells his brother some startling news: "We have found the Messiah!"

Nathanael (1:46)

Initially skeptical, he quickly becomes a believer when Jesus displays His divine knowledge.

Nicodemus (3:1-21)

A curious Pharisee quietly meets with Jesus at night.

A Samaritan woman (4:5-29)

A conversation with a woman of Samaria shows that evangelism is a process, not just an event.

A man with congenital blindness (9:1-41)

A blind man's suffering turns out to be the means by which Jesus reveals Himself as the Light of the World.

Mary of Bethany (11:1)

The death of her brother reveals the depth of her quiet devotion to Jesus.

Lazarus (11:1-44)

Jesus brings this man back from the dead, yet Jesus' enemies still think they can do away with Him!

Judas (13:21-30)

The betrayer may have fooled others, but he could not fool Jesus.

The women around Jesus (19:25)

Women played a major part in Jesus' life and work.

Thomas (20:24-29)

A doubting disciple becomes an illustration of how faith overcomes skepticism.

The three Persons of the Trinity work together as partners.

Nazareth—The Other Side of the Tracks (1:46)

A community on "the other side of the tracks" is the hometown for the Savior of the world.

Sacred Space (1:51)

Jesus tapped into one of the most powerful concepts of Old Testament theology—the idea that a specific place on earth is made special because of God's presence there.

The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society (3:21)

Jesus used different approaches to influence different people toward faith.

Ethnic Games with Religious Roots (4:19-23)

People sometimes use their religious roots to avoid dealing with spiritual truth. But Jesus refused to play that game when eternal life and death were at stake.

"We Interrupt This Program ..." (7:37)

Jesus picks a dramatic, climactic moment in Jewish life to announce Himself as God.

"Who Sinned?" Health and Disease in the Bible (9:2-3)

Scripture mentions more than 40 specific diseases or disabilities and accepts the fact that concerns about physical health are universal.

The Cost of Following Jesus (15:18-25)

Sooner or later, following Christ has a cost, and those who think they can get by without paying it are misguided. In fact, if there's no cost, is there really any genuine commitment?

Whose Job Is Evangelism? (16:8)

John shows that bringing people to faith is a cooperative effort between Christians and the Holy Spirit.

The Women Around Jesus (19:25)

Women played a major part in Jesus' life and work. This listing summarizes their participation.

THE SEVEN SIGNS OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

A famous author once said that the key to good writing is not in knowing what to put into a story, but what to leave out. Imagine, then, the problem of writing down the story of Jesus, especially if you had been an eyewitness and even a participant in the events. Of all that Jesus said and did, what would you include? What would you leave out?



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John solved the problem by determining what he wanted his Gospel to accomplish: he wanted his readers to know that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [they might] have life in His name” (John 20:31). To that end, he organized his account around seven miracles that Jesus performed, seven “signs” pointing to His divine nature:

THE SIGNS AND THEIR MEANINGS

Turns water into wine (2:1–12)	Jesus is the source of life.
Heals a nobleman’s son (4:46–54)	Jesus is master over distance.
Heals a lame man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1–17)	Jesus is master over time.
Feeds 5, 000 (6:1–14)	Jesus is the bread of life.
Walks on water, stills a storm (6:15–21)	Jesus is master over nature.
Heals a man blind from birth (9:1–41)	Jesus is the light of the world.
Raises Lazarus from the dead (11:17–45)	Jesus has power over death.

The fact that there are seven sign miracles is significant. In the Jewish view of life, the number seven signified perfection or completion. John’s Gospel presents the seven miracles like a diamond refracting seven bands of color. Upon closer inspection, each one turns out to be rooted in Old Testament understanding of the Messiah. John’s point is that Jesus is perfect and complete. His miracles show His true colors—that He is the Messiah that Israel has been looking for, and that He alone offers eternal life.

This way of presenting things may seem strange to some 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 in a way that would relate to the thought-forms of its day. It is more meticulously and artistically composed than any prize-winning narrative or award-winning film. ♦

John the Baptist baptizes Jesus.	John 1:29–34
Jesus turns water into wine.	John 2:1–11
Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again.	John 3:1–21
Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar.	John 4:1–42
Jesus feeds the 5, 000.	John 6:1–15
Jesus heals a man blind from birth.	John 9
Jesus gives His discourse on the Good Shepherd.	John 10:1–18
Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.	John 11:1–54
Jesus gives the Upper Room discourse.	John 13:1–17
From the Cross, Jesus commends His mother to John’s care.	John 19:25–27
Jesus rises from the dead.	John 20:1–18
Thomas doubts the Resurrection, but believes when Jesus appears.	John 20:24–29

JOHN—THE APOSTLE OF LOVE



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John and his brother James came from the prosperous family of Zebedee, a successful fisherman who owned his own boat and had hired servants (Mark 1:19–20). Together with Simon and Andrew, with whom they were in partnership (Luke 5:10), the brothers became loyal followers of Jesus. Their mother Salome also joined the fellowship and supported Jesus' ministry (Mark 15:4–41; Luke 8:3).

Modern Christians regard John as the “apostle of love” because of the frequent appearance of that theme in his writings and because the Gospel of John refers to him as the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 13:23). But he certainly didn’t start out as a model of charity.

Apparently headstrong and opinionated, Jesus dubbed John and his brother the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17). On one occasion they created a storm of protest and indignation from the other disciples by asking if they could sit on Jesus’ right and left hands in glory (Mark 10:35–45). On another occasion they suggested calling down fire from heaven on an unreceptive Samaritan village; Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:51–56).

Somehow John’s exposure to Jesus worked an amazing change in his life. After the Lord’s departure, he became a leader of the Christian movement, as might be expected. But now his perspective was different. When word came that the gospel had spread to the Samaritans, John was sent with Peter to investigate. Whereas before he had wanted to destroy Samaritans, now he helped bring them the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–25). The son of thunder had become a son of love!

Church tradition holds that after the execution of his brother James, John eventually migrated to Ephesus, from which he wrote or oversaw the writing of five New Testament documents. From there he was banished to the island of Patmos, but later returned to Ephesus where he died sometime after A.D. 98. ♦

Name means: “Yahweh is gracious.”

Home: Probably raised in Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee; later lived at Ephesus; banished to the island of Patmos in old age.

Family: Was the son of Zebedee; mother was probably Salome; he was the younger brother of James. Salome and Mary may have been sisters (Matt. 27:56; John 19:25); if so, James and John would have been cousins to Jesus.

Occupation: Commercial fisherman; later, one of Jesus’ disciples and a member of His inner circle; also an author of a Gospel, three New Testament letters, and Revelation.

Best known today for: His close relationship to Jesus, and his New Testament writings.

AUTHOR AND SETTING

The Gospel of John does not name its author, but early church tradition usually identified the writer as John, the apostle of Jesus. The book is similar in style and language to 1 John, which in turn is connected to 2 and 3 John, and the three epistles are also believed to have been produced by the apostle John. This is consistent with the author’s claim that he was an eyewitness of the events recorded (John 1:14; compare 1 John 1:1–4).

It is difficult to say with certainty to whom this Gospel was addressed. It uses both Jewish and Greek thought forms in its presentation of Christ, and appears to have been written for the widest possible readership. Whoever the intended audience was, the purpose of the book is clear: that through this document they would come to have saving faith in Christ (John 20:31).



Who Are The Apostles? Week #3: Introducing John, The Evangelist

It is widely believed that the John who wrote the Gospel is the one who, late in his life, was exiled for a time on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, where he wrote the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1:9). According to tradition, John was eventually allowed to return to Ephesus, where he died sometime after Trajan became emperor of Rome in A.D. 98. Thus the Gospel is believed to have been written in Ephesus sometime during the 90s.♦⁶

CHAPTER XII REVELATION

Theme. The book of Revelation is the climax of God's revelation of truth to man, the capstone of the edifice of the Scriptures, of which Genesis is the foundation stone. The Bible would not be complete without either book. If the omission of Genesis would have left us in ignorance as to the beginnings of things, the omission of Revelation would have deprived us of much light concerning the consummation of all things. Between Genesis and Revelation a striking balance may be seen, as follows:

GENESIS	REVELATION
Paradise lost	Paradise regained
The first city, a failure	City of the redeemed, a success
The beginning of the curse	No more curse
Marriage of first Adam	Marriage of second Adam
First tears	Every tear wiped away
Satan's entrance	Satan's doom
Old creation	New creation
Communion broken	Communion restored

The book of Revelation is the consummation of Old Testament prophecy. It is full of symbols and language borrowed from the writings of those prophets who were favored with glorious revelations concerning the end-time—Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. It is the grand “Amen” of, and the glad “Hallelujah” for, the fulfillment of the predictions of the prophets—the glad answer to their yearning and prayer that the kingdom of God might come and that His will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. “As the completion of the whole prophetic Scriptures it gathers up the threads of all the former books and weaves them into one chain of many links which binds all history to the throne of God.”

Above all, this book is a revelation—an unveiling—of the Lord Jesus Christ. In his Gospel, John describes His earthly life and ministry. Before writing the book of Revelation, the apostle is caught up to the throne of God where he sees the Lord Jesus clothed with the glory which He has with the Father before the foundation of the world; where he sees Him who was judged by the world, returning as its Judge; where he sees Him who was rejected by men, taking possession of all the kingdoms of the world, as King of kings, and Lord of lords.

The Revelation is the book of Christ’s coming in glory, therefore we shall sum up the theme as follows: The coming of Christ in glory, as the supreme climax of the age.

Why Written. It was written by John the apostle at the direct command of Jesus, in order that there might be a book of prophecy for this dispensation.

Where Written. On Patmos, an isle off the coast of Asia Minor, about AD 90.

CONTENTS

The analysis of 1:19 will give us the three main heads of our outline:

- I. Concerning Christ: “The things which thou hast seen.” Chap. 1.
- II. Concerning the church: “The things which are.” Chaps. 2; 3.
- III. Concerning the Kingdom: “The things which shall be.” Chaps. 4–22.

⁶ *Word in life study Bible*. (1996). (electronic ed., Jn 1:1). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.



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Facts to be remembered in studying Revelation:

1. The book is confessedly the most difficult of interpretation of all the books in the canon. One has said, "His courage is greater than his wisdom who finds no room for doubt in the interpretation of much in the Apocalypse." In meeting some portions the meaning of which is not clear, rather than seek for strained, fanciful and far-fetched interpretations, it is better to say, "I do not understand," and then wait patiently for light.

2. It is quite probable that the interpretation of the book will become clearer as time arrives for the fulfillment of its prophecies. In Old Testament times, the coming of the Messiah was a fact agreed upon by all the pious of the nation; but to them, Messianic prophecy must have presented many difficulties of interpretation, as the book of Revelation does to us. Even the prophets did not always understand their own prophecies. 1 Peter 1:10, 11. It was as the prophecies concerning the Christ began to be fulfilled that the spiritually enlightened among the people—of whom Simeon (Luke 2:25–35) is an example—would find their perplexities disappearing as the rays of the "bright and morning Star" would shine on the pages of sacred Writ. We can all agree as to the main facts of the book—coming tribulation and judgment, the coming of Christ in glory, the setting up of His kingdom, etc.—and then wait patiently till further study, increased spiritual enlightenment and passing events shed light on those details which at present seem obscure.

3. Apart from the interpretation of the book, there are many valuable lessons to be learned, many warnings to be heeded, many promises to encourage, that make the book of Revelation of real practical value to the Christian. For example, the messages to the churches contain practical teaching that can be applied both to the church and to the individual. In this connection it is well to remember that it is always more profitable to practice the things that we do understand, instead of puzzling, speculating, and splitting hairs over the things that we do not understand.

4. Since the book of Revelation is a mosaic of Old Testament prophecies and symbols, the study of certain prophets—Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah—will provide the key to many a closed door in its interpretation.⁷

THE NAVARRE BIBLE

Saint John's Gospel

with a commentary by members of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre

FOUR COURTS PRESS • DUBLIN

SCEPTER PUBLISHERS • NEW YORK

© Text of the biblical books in English: The translation used in this book is the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, copyrighted 1965 and 1966 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and used by permission.

© Other material (origination and selection): Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, SA 1984 Original title: *Sagrada Biblia: Evangelio de según San Juan*

© Translation and typography: Michael Adams 2005

Nihil obstat: Stephen J. Greene, censor deputatus

Imprimi potest: Kevin, Archbishop of Dublin, 6 September 1986

The translation of introductions and commentary was made by Michael Adams.

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

First edition 1990; reprinted many times

Second edition (reset and repaged) 2005

Reprinted 2007, 2011

ISBN 978-1-85182-903-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data [for first volume in this series]

Bible. O.T. English. Revised Standard. 1999.

The Navarre Bible.—North American ed.

p. cm

"The Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy in the Revised Standard Version and New Vulgate with a commentary by members of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Navarre."

Includes bibliographical references.

Contents: [1] The Pentateuch.

ISBN 1-889334-21-9 (hardback: alk. paper)

⁷ Pearlman, M. (2012). *New Testament: Romans to Revelation* (Vol. 4, pp. 106–109). Gospel Publishing House.



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I. Title.

BS891.A1 1999.P75

221.7'7—dc21

99-23033

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The title "Navarre Bible" is © Four Courts Press 2003.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Quotations from Vatican II documents are based on the translation in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery, OP (Dublin 1981).

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Preface and Preliminary Notes

The Commentary

The distinguishing feature of the *Navarre Bible* is its commentary on the biblical text. Compiled by members of the Theology faculty of the University of Navarre, Pamplona, Spain, this commentary draws on writings of the Fathers, texts of the Magisterium of the Church, and works of spiritual writers, including St Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei; it was he who in the late 1960s entrusted the faculty at Navarre with the project of making a translation of the Bible and adding to it a commentary of the type found here.

The commentary, which is not particularly technical, is designed to explain the biblical text and to identify its main points, the message God wants to get across through the sacred writers. It also deals with doctrinal and practical matters connected with the text.

The first volume of the *Navarre Bible* (the English edition) came out in 1985—first, twelve volumes covering the New Testament; then seven volumes covering the Old Testament. Many reprints and revised editions have appeared over the past twenty years. All the various volumes are currently in print.

The Revised Standard Version

The English translation of the Bible used in the *Navarre Bible* is the Revised Standard Version (RSV) which is, as its preface states, "an authorized revision of the American Standard Version, published in 1901, which was a revision of the King James Version [the "Authorized Version"], published in 1611".

The RSV of the entire Bible was published in 1952; its Catholic edition (RSVCE) appeared in 1966. The differences between the RSV and the RSVCE New Testament texts are listed in the "Explanatory Notes" in the endmatter of this volume. Whereas the Spanish editors of what is called in English the "Navarre Bible" made a new translation of the Bible, for the English edition the RSV has proved to be a very appropriate choice of translation. The publishers of the *Navarre Bible* wish to thank the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA for permission to use that text.

The Latin Text



Who Are The Apostles? Week #3: Introducing John, The Evangelist

This volume also carries the official Latin version of the New Testament in the *editio typica altera* of the New Vulgate (Vatican City, 1986).

PRELIMINARY NOTES

The headings within the biblical text have been provided by the editors (they are not taken from the RSV). A full list of these headings, giving an overview of the New Testament, can be found at the back of the volume.

References in the biblical text indicate parallel texts in other biblical books. All these marginal references come from the *Navarre Bible* editors, not the RSV.

Introduction to the Gospel according to John

THE AUTHOR

Some New Testament texts contain the writer's name, but in the case of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles no name is explicitly given. This might not seem to be particularly important, for what really matters is the Church's acceptance of a text as canonical, that is, inspired by God. Yet it is interesting to know who wrote a particular inspired book, especially if the human author was an eyewitness of the events he reports, and even more so if the book deals with the life of Jesus Christ, his teaching and his death and resurrection—as is the case with the Fourth Gospel, which says that “he who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true” (Jn 19:35); and “this is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things ...; and we know that his testimony is true” (Jn 21:24).

To discover who wrote a New Testament book we must explore the very early tradition of the Church, which is contemporary with or almost contemporary with when it was written. The authenticity of these sacred writings was as much a matter of concern to the early Christians as to later generations. They were living very soon after Christ's time; they often spoke among themselves, in the way people discuss recent events, about the historical facts of the Master's life; and they believed in Jesus' divinity because these facts—the miracles, the prophecies and especially his glorious resurrection—clearly bore out that he was the Son of God. This explains why they defended Christian truth against sceptics; they were ready at any time to answer anyone who called on them to account for their hope (cf. 1 Pet 3:15), quoting for them the testimony given by those who had seen and heard Christ, for, as St Peter averred, “we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet 1:16).

The Gospel we are now discussing enjoyed great prestige from as early as the beginning of the second century, as evidenced by the fact that phrases taken from it or based on it are to be found in very early documents. Thus St Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107–115) speaks of the Spirit which knows where it comes from and where it is going to and says that the Word, the Son of God, always does what is pleasing to him who sent him (cf. Jn 1:1; 7:28; 8:29); St Polycarp in his letter to the Philippians (c. 110) also echoes some phrases of the Fourth Gospel, as does St Justin (c. 150) when he says it is necessary to be born again to enter the Kingdom of heaven (cf. Jn 3:5).

In addition to these references, there are explicit testimonies which clearly state that the apostle St John wrote the Fourth Gospel. The famous “Muratorian Canon” written in Rome around the year 180 contains a prologue against Marcion and his followers, in which it is said that “the Gospel of John was communicated and proclaimed to the churches by John himself, while he was still alive, according to Papias of Hierapolis.” Papias lived around the year 135, and it is known that he was a disciple of John, so what he has to say is particularly valuable.

St Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, also refers to the authenticity of this Gospel. Irenaeus was born around 130 in Smyrna (Asia Minor), where he knew St Polycarp, who according to Tertullian was made bishop of Smyrna by St John himself. St Irenaeus says that “John, the disciple of the Lord, who had even rested on his breast, himself published the Gospel, while he was living in Ephesus.” This testimony carries special weight, given Irenaeus' connexion with Polycarp.

Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History* (6, 14, 5–7), refers to the testimony of Clement of Alexandria, who passes on a tradition which says that John wrote his Gospel after the other evangelists had written theirs. Victorinus of Pettau's witness is of a later date (c. 305). From the fourth century on there is a



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unanimous tradition that St John wrote the Gospel which bears his name. Internal analysis of the text confirms what tradition tells us. The developed form of doctrine we find in the Gospel indicates that, to produce it, God availed himself of a man who had for years meditated on and made his own everything which he reports to us concerning Jesus and his disciples. Besides, there are many little points in the Gospel which can be explained only if John is the author. For example, he refers to John as the Precursor of Christ, where the Synoptic Gospels call him John the Baptist: they have to call him that to avoid any possible confusion with John the apostle. But in the Fourth Gospel there is no danger of any such confusion since the name of John the evangelist is nowhere mentioned.

Also, we learn from the Gospel that its author is “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (Jn 21:20) and who was one of the twelve apostles, for he is present when the risen Lord appears among them by the Sea of Tiberias (cf. Jn 21:1). Now, the Synoptics tell us that Jesus loved three of his disciples in a special way, choosing them to see his glory on Tabor (cf. Mt 17:1–2) and his humiliation in Gethsemane (cf. Mk 14:33). These were Peter, James the Greater and John. And one of these is the “beloved disciple”, who wrote the Gospel. St Peter it cannot be, for on various occasions we see him accompanied by the beloved disciple (cf. Jn 20:2ff; 21:20). Nor can it be James the Greater, because he was martyred around the year 40 (cf. Acts 12:2) and the Fourth Gospel was written towards the end of the century—which leaves only St John the evangelist. Besides, many literary features of the Gospel confirm its authenticity. The writer is obviously Jewish, very familiar with Jewish customs and interested in Jewish feasts. He has an intimate knowledge of the geography of Palestine and gives many topographical references (cf. Jn 1:28; 3:23; 4:5–6; 10:22; 11:18). The style of writing is markedly Semitic.

The only ambiguous text in Tradition on this subject is a passage from Papias quoted by Eusebius, in which the name of John is mentioned twice. This text reads: “If someone came along who had heard the presbyters speak, I used to make a point of asking him what did the presbyters hear from the lips of Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other disciple of the Lord, and also what do Aristion and the presbyter John say.” Interpretation of this text presents two difficulties. First, was Papias referring on both occasions to the apostle St John—naming him twice simply because he lived so much longer after the death of the other disciples; or is his second reference to another John, a person of importance but not the apostle? Second, if the latter hypothesis is correct, which of the two is the author of the Gospel—“John the apostle” or “John the presbyter”, both “disciples of the Lord”? Eusebius attributes the Gospel explicitly to John the apostle, and so does St Irenaeus, as we have seen.

Rationalist critics, however, on the basis of this text of Papias, argue that St Irenaeus confused this “John the presbyter” with the apostle John: they argue that it was John the presbyter who appointed St Polycarp bishop of Smyrna and who wrote the Fourth Gospel. But there is no basis for attributing this mistake to St Irenaeus, and besides, the great mass of the information that has come down to us from Christian antiquity, and the internal evidence, all argue in favour of St John the apostle as author of the Fourth Gospel. So it is not surprising that the Church has always held to the traditional attribution of the Fourth Gospel to St John.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GOSPEL OF ST JOHN AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

If we enter St John’s Gospel after reading the Synoptics we sense that we are entering a different atmosphere. Even in the prologue the evangelist soars towards the heights of divinity. It is not surprising that St John is symbolized by an eagle. The evangelist “soars very high, mounts beyond the darkness of the earth and fixes his gaze on the light of truth ...”.

Even in the way it reports facts, the Fourth Gospel adopts an approach different from the Synoptics. For example, it centres Jesus’ public ministry mainly in Judea; although the Gospel does mention his ministry in Galilee (cf. Jn 2; 6), which the Synoptics cover very well, St John concentrates mainly on Jesus’ activity in Jerusalem. The first three Gospels only tell us of our Lord going up to the Holy City once during his public ministry, the occasion when he will die during the feast of the Passover, whereas John refers to at least three visits (cf. Jn 2:13, 23; 5:1; 6:4; 12:1). Of the twenty-nine miracles described in the Synoptics, St John refers to only two (cf. Jn 6:11, 19) and he tells us of five additional ones (cf. Jn 2:1–11; 4:46–54; 5:1–9; 9:1–41; 11:33–44). But he does not mention the Transfiguration; nor the institution of the Eucharist

at the Last Supper—which is not to say that he is unaware of its importance, for he gives us very full and very clear accounts of Jesus' discourses about the Bread of Life (cf. Jn 6:32–58).

On the history of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Fourth Gospel coincides with the Synoptics, but here also it has a perspective of its own: it describes everything very much in terms of the glorification of Christ: this is Jesus' “hour” (Jn 2:4; 7:30; 13:1; 17:1), when the Father glorifies the Son; when the Son, by dying, overcomes the devil, sin and death and is raised up above all things (cf. Jn 12:32–33). And so, when Jesus announces his passion in advance, the Synoptics focus on the appropriateness of the Son *suffering* (cf. Mt 16:21 and par.), whereas St John stresses how fitting it is that the Son of man should be “lifted up” (Jn 3:14–15; 8:28; 12:32–33).

Even Jesus' teaching contains different nuances in St John: for example, the Fourth Gospel only once mentions the “kingdom of God”, whereas the Synoptics, especially St Matthew, refer to it often (Jn 3:5; cf. Mt 3:2; 4:23; 5:3; 11:12; 13:24; etc.). There are subjects not treated by St John which appear frequently in the Synoptics, such as the question of the sabbath, Pharisees' legislation, etc.; but he speaks about life, truth, light, glory—which are hardly mentioned in the first three Gospels.

Scholars have proposed various hypotheses to explain why St John wrote like this. Some say that he was not acquainted with the other Gospels and that he just wrote what he thought best fitted his purpose. This is very unlikely, given that the first three Gospels were written so much earlier: John must have known them. Besides, it does not explain why he omits important things like the Transfiguration and the institution of the Blessed Eucharist: he would only have done that if he knew they were covered in the other Gospels.

One coherent explanation is that John was mainly trying to fill out the Synoptics, focusing more light on certain episodes. His Gospel does not contradict the Synoptics; what it does is give more detail. For example, he reports Jesus' triple commandment to St Peter to feed the sheep—which explains how Peter should approach the mission he has received to be the rock on which Christ will build his Church (cf. Mt 16:18).

St John himself gives us one reason why his Gospel is different. He says that it is a testimony to what he has seen and heard. Rather than speak of evangelizing or preaching, the Fourth Gospel prefers to use “testify” or “bear witness” or “teach”. Thus, he presents the preaching of the Baptist as an instance of testimony to Christ (cf. Jn 1:7, 19, 32, 34; 3:26; 5:33). Our Lord is always the object of this testimony, which comes from different directions in the Fourth Gospel: first and foremost, it comes from the Father who has sent Jesus to bear witness to him (cf. Jn 5:37); then, Jesus bears witness to himself, because he knows where he has come from and where he is going to (cf. Jn 8:14) and he is attesting to what he has seen (cf. Jn 3:11); the Scriptures also bear witness to Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 5:39), as will the Holy Spirit whom he will send (cf. Jn 15:26); and, finally, our Lord says to the apostles: “You also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning” (Jn 15:27).

This concept of bearing witness is also present in other inspired writers, though not as clearly as in St John—in Hebrews 12:1, for example. In the early centuries of the Church it was quite common for Christians to ratify in their blood the testimony of faith in Christ—martyrdom becoming, as it were, the climax of perfect commitment to the Lord. The word “martyr” comes from the Greek verb *martireo*, which means “bearing witness”. Every Christian therefore, has to be a “martyr”, a faithful witness, wherever he is, a living testimony of Christ to people around him.

Another unusual feature of St John's Gospel is that it is a “spiritual gospel”, in the words of Clement of Alexandria (on account of which St John has been called “the theologian”). This refers to John's desire to explore and explain the deeper meaning of Jesus' words and actions. In St John's account our Lord usually begins his teachings with an intriguing remark or question, to awaken the curiosity of his listeners, and then moves on to explain some point of doctrine. For example, in the case of Nicodemus, when he speaks about being born again; or his conversation with the Samaritan woman about living water: what Jesus is saying obviously means much more than one would get from a first glance at the text. In fact, it is only when the Holy Spirit comes that the disciples grasp the full meaning of the Master's words (cf. Jn 14:26). And so, on a number of occasions, the Evangelist actually says that they did not understand what Jesus was trying to tell them but that after his resurrection they did understand its profound meaning (cf. Jn

2:17, 22; 12:16; 13:7; 16:4). The Master, when he sees they cannot grasp his meaning, consoles them by promising the “Spirit of truth”, who will guide them into all the truth (Jn 16:13).

Also, events treated in the narrative have a deeper meaning than is at first obvious. This has led some to think that St John’s narrative is not history, and that the miracles Jesus works, and even the people involved, are mere symbols, literary devices invented by the evangelist—like examples a catechist might devise to illustrate his teaching. This view means denying the inerrancy of an inspired text, and therefore, it is rejected by the Magisterium of the Church, which maintains the historicity of the text of the Fourth Gospel. The Pontifical Biblical Commission teaches that it cannot be “said that the facts narrated in the Fourth Gospel were invented wholly or in part as allegories or doctrinal symbols”, nor may it be affirmed that “the sermons of our Lord are not properly and truly discourses of the Lord himself, but instead theological compositions of the writer, placed on our Lord’s lips.”⁸

Besides, to say that St John invents facts is to fail to understand the whole character of the Fourth Gospel and the Semitic mind, which is so fond of the concrete and particular: quite often events themselves provide the starting point for explaining some matter of doctrine (cf. Hos 1:2–11; Jer 16:1–3; 18:1–5).

St John selects particular miracles of Jesus because he wants to use them to emphasize a teaching: at the wedding at Cana our Lord manifests his glory and at the same time reveals that the messianic age has begun, and light is thrown on the role of his mother, Mary, in the redemption of mankind (cf. Jn 2:1–11); the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, attested to also by the Synoptics, provides the historical prologue to Christ’s words about the Bread of Life (cf. Jn 6); the curing of the man blind from birth provides the Evangelist with an opportunity to show how blind the Pharisees are to the light of the world, Christ (cf. Jn 9); by raising Lazarus, the Master shows that only he is the Resurrection and the Life (cf. Jn 11).

St John insists that he “has seen” all this; that he has “touched” it with his hands (Jn 1:14; 19:35; 1 Jn 1:2). After a lifetime of preaching and prayer, it is only logical that he should see it all from a deeper, clearer perspective. St Augustine is right when he says that St John “soared beyond the flesh, soared beyond the earth which he trod, beyond the seas which he saw, beyond the air where birds fly; soared beyond the sun, beyond the moon and the stars, beyond all spirits which are unseen, beyond his own intelligence and the very reason of his thinking soul. Soaring beyond all these, beyond his very self, where did he reach, what did he see? ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’” Therefore, what he narrates, far from contradicting what we read in the Synoptics, takes it as read, and fills it out.

JOHN THE APOSTLE

Of all the Gospels, the Fourth most clearly reflects the personality of its human author. The other Gospels also tell us something about St John the apostle, to which we can add further information—though not as much as we would like—from primitive Christian tradition. He was a native of Bethsaida, a town of Galilee on the northern shore of the Sea of Tiberias. His parents were Zebedee and Salome, and his brother James the Greater. They were fishing folk, fairly well off, a family which did not hesitate to put itself completely at Jesus’ disposal. James and John, in response to Jesus’ call, “left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him” (Mk 1:20 and par.). Salome, their mother, also followed Jesus, providing for him from her means, in Galilee and Jerusalem; she was with him right up to Calvary (cf. Mk 15:40–41 and par.).

Along with Andrew, Peter’s brother, John had been with John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan and had even become one of his disciples, until one day, on seeing Jesus, the Baptist exclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God!”; as soon as they heard him say this they followed Jesus and spent the whole day with him (Jn 1:35–39). They returned home to Bethsaida and went back to fishing; and a little later on, Jesus, who had been preparing them since that first meeting, called them, in a definitive way, to be among the Twelve. St John would not have been twenty at the time.

From then on St John follows Christ and never leaves him. The Gospels all list him among the Twelve alongside his brother James, after St Peter and, sometimes, after St Andrew (cf. Mk 3:17 and par.). The passionate love these two brothers had for the Lord led them on occasions to react energetically against people who rejected the Master. When certain Samaritans refused to receive him, the sons of Zebedee asked

Jesus (Lk 9:54), “Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?” (as happened to the messengers of King Ahaziah: 2 Kings 1:10–15). They had not yet fully understood Jesus’ mission—to show men the Father’s love. Gradually, taught by our Lord, they did come to understand it: so much so that it will be John who engraves on our mind the truth that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). But, in those early days, James and John sometimes seem impatient to see the triumph of their Master and are ready to call for punishment from heaven. It is not surprising, then, that our Lord describes them as “Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17). John’s strong character and youthful spontaneity make him the disciples’ mouthpiece when, on another occasion, they want to prevent someone not of their company from using Jesus’ name to cast out demons (cf. Lk 9:49).

Our Lord showed the sons of Zebedee, and Peter, special signs of trust and friendship (cf. Mk 1:17; 5:37; 9:2ff; 14:32–42). St John discreetly refers to himself in the Gospel as the disciple whom Jesus loved (cf. Jn 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20), meaning that our Lord had special affection for him. He puts it on record that, at that solemn point in the Last Supper when Jesus announces that one of them will betray him, he did not hesitate to ask our Lord, resting his head on his chest, who the traitor would be (cf. Jn 13:23). So much, in fact, did Jesus trust his beloved disciple that, from the cross, he gave into his charge the person he loved most in the world—his blessed Mother.

St John was very close to St Peter, whom he knew before either of them met Christ (both were fishermen from Bethsaida). They were the two to whom our Lord gave the job of preparing the paschal meal (cf. Lk 22:8), and, on the night of the Passion, it was probably John who managed to get Peter into the chief priest’s house (cf. Jn 18:16). They ran together to the tomb on the morning of Easter Sunday. St John never forgot that empty sepulchre, which led him to believe in the Resurrection. In his Gospel he recalls how he ran faster than Peter and reached the tomb first but stayed outside—we must presume in deference to Peter, to whom our Lord had promised the primacy of the Church (cf. Jn 20:3–9). John was the first to recognize the risen Jesus when he appeared to a group of disciples on the lakeshore. He joyfully tells Peter, “It is the Lord!” (Jn 21:7). This was the occasion when Jesus, in reply to a question from Peter about what would happen to John, makes a reference to John’s death (cf. Jn 21:20–23). The Fourth Gospel closes with this scene where the two most prominent apostles converse with Jesus.

After the Lord’s ascension, St John stays close to St Peter. The Acts of the Apostles shows them going together to the temple to pray, and there, at the Beautiful Gate, through Jesus’ power, they cure a man lame from birth (cf. Acts 3:1–9; 2:46). There and then, St Peter preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the leading priests became “annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the morrow” (Acts 4:2–3). But this only encouraged the apostles to preach the Gospel more boldly, even to their judges (cf. Acts 4:13–22). They prayed and preached together, and they also shared the joy of being “counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name” of Jesus (Acts 5:41). When they were set free by the Jewish authorities, they went back to their friends and all prayed the second Psalm (cf. Acts 4:25). In prayer they obtained the strength to preach boldly in the midst of adversity and persecution.

Peter and John are also seen together when they are sent by the apostolic college to administer the sacrament of Confirmation to people in Samaria already baptized by Philip (cf. Acts 8:14). Years later, around the year 50, at the first Council of the Church, held in Jerusalem, James and Peter and John appear as pillars of the Church (cf. Gal 2:9).

From this point forward, our information about St John’s life comes from Church tradition. Reliable reports tell us that he left Palestine and went to Ephesus, where he looked after the churches of Asia Minor (so says St Polycarp of Smyrna, who died in 155 at the age of eighty-six and who, we are told, was a disciple of St John himself). This piece of information agrees with the testimony of Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus (died c. 190)—which Eusebius of Caesarea quotes; he says that John belonged to a Jewish priestly family and died in Ephesus, a tradition consistent with the fact that the Fourth Gospel mentions Jewish feasts so often and with the fact that John was known to the high priest (cf. Jn 18:16).

What is not so clear is when exactly he moved to Ephesus. We have already said that he was still in Jerusalem around the year 50. And it seems likely that he had not yet gone to Ephesus when St Paul wrote



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his Second Letter to Timothy, around the year 66 or 67, in which he gives him instructions on how to govern that church (cf. 2 Tim 4:1–2); all of which points to St John arriving in Ephesus after the death of St Paul, which took place in 67: for one thing, all the churches of the region would have been in need of his attention, and, also, the Jewish War, the war between Judea and Rome (which would end in the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70), caused most Christians to flee both the Holy City and Palestine. We do not know with any certainty whether St John brought the Virgin Mary with him to Ephesus at that time or whether she had already been assumed into heaven; but we can be sure that the apostle took great care of her until the end of her life.

Tradition does not give us a clear picture of what happened to John in Ephesus. It does confirm the reports of St Irenaeus, Eusebius and other ecclesiastical writers that he was sent into exile on the island of Patmos, where he wrote the Apocalypse (cf. Rev 1:9); this took place in the fourteenth year of Domitian's reign, 95. After Domitian's death the following year, John returned to Ephesus where he had now to face not only external enemies of the Church but certain Christians who had become obstinate heretics. With fatherly solicitude the apostle tried to heal the divisions and, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote three letters to faithful Christians warning them of dangers. It would seem that the letter we know as 3 John was in fact the first.

This "third letter" is addressed to Gaius, a priest, who had remained loyal to John's authority and to the truth of the Gospel. The apostle's main concern at this time is to strengthen his children in the faith: "No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth" (3 Jn 4); and he advises Gaius not to imitate evil people like Diotrephes who criticize the apostle out of jealousy.

The second letter is addressed to a particular church—which one, we cannot tell—whom St John calls "the elect lady", in the same way as St Peter (1 Pet 5:13) calls the church at Rome the one who is likewise "chosen". He is worried lest the truth become adulterated, and he warns the church against deceivers who deny the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Jn 9–11). Also, presumably because these heretics were deforming the true ideal of Christian love, he spells it out absolutely clearly: "And this is love, that we follow his commandments" (2 Jn 6). This and the previous letter are both very short.

St John ranges more widely in the "first letter", which is perhaps the last he wrote. It is addressed to the faithful in general, and may have been a kind of encyclical letter to the churches of Asia Minor. In it he keeps concentrating on two themes (the same as in 2 John)—Christian faith and love, which heretics are trying to undermine. He never tires of telling them, "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you" (1 Jn 2:24; cf. 2:7, 25; 3:11). To strengthen their resolve to stand fast in faith and Christian living (cf. 5:13), he deals, one after the other, with various parallel themes—light (cf. 1:5ff), righteousness (cf. 2:29ff), love (cf. 4:7ff) and truth (cf. 5:6ff); but the same basic ideas underlie the whole letter: we are children of God, who is Love, and this means that we must live according to his commandments (cf. 3:23). St John's style and teaching in this letter are so reminiscent of the Fourth Gospel that we cannot doubt that they are written by the same hand. In fact, all the indicators are that St John wrote both these texts in the same period, but we cannot work out which came first.

We can take it therefore, that it was at Ephesus, between his exile on Patmos and his death at the start of Trajan's reign (98–117), that St John, in his solicitude for the Church, wrote the three letters and the Gospel. What little more tradition tells us about the last years of his life confirms his concern for purity of doctrine and faithfulness to the commandment of love. St Jerome tells how the disciples used to carry him to Christian meetings, his age preventing him from walking, and how he used to repeat all the time: "My little children, love one another." And when the disciples asked him why he was always saying the same thing, he replied, "It is the Lord's commandment, and if you keep it, that alone suffices."

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The structure of St John's Gospel fits in with his aim in writing it, moved as he was by the Holy Spirit: he tells us himself that he wrote the Gospel "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31). In general, St John follows the same order as followed by the apostles in their oral preaching, and in so doing he coincides with the Synoptic Gospels: Jesus begins his public ministry after being baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist; he preaches and



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works miracles in Galilee and Jerusalem; and his life on earth ends with his passion and glorious resurrection (cf. Acts 10:38–41).

Within this general framework, St John follows a plan of his own, different from that of the Synoptics. For this he uses certain basic ideas which he develops in the course of his Gospel—the succession of Jewish feasts which mark the different stages in his account; the treatment of certain concepts, like the New Testament taking the place of the Old; the themes of life, of the Bread of Life, of the light, truth, love, etc.; and the gradual and dramatic manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, contrasting with the growing blindness of those Jews who reject him, until the high point comes, the “hour” of Jesus and of the power of darkness. All these threads are woven together to form this Gospel, giving it a particular structure and thematic cohesion. Broadly, we might say that the structure of the Fourth Gospel is along these lines: *Prologue* (1:1–18). This introduction is of great theological importance. Jesus Christ, the eternal word of God, with the Father, creator of the world, true Light, has become man in order to bring the world light, that is, definitive and saving revelation for all men. However, the Jews in general did not accept the Light even though John the Baptist bore witness to it; but those who do accept it and believe in him are raised to become children of God. This prologue contains, in essence, all the great themes which the Gospel will develop—Christ’s revealing of himself, light, truth, life, glory, revelation of the Father, faith and unbelief.

PART ONE: JESUS IS MANIFESTED AS THE MESSIAH BY SIGNS AND WORDS

This part runs from the Baptist’s testimony regarding Jesus (1:19) to the Last Supper (chap. 13). It can be divided into various sections:

1. *Introduction* and 2. *Jesus, the author of the new economy of salvation: first signs of faith in him* (1:19–4:54). Section 2 includes the Baptist’s testimony (cf. 1:19–34), the calling of the first disciples (cf. 1:35–51), and our Lord’s ministry in Galilee when he performed his first miracle at the wedding at Cana (cf. 2:1–12). These episodes cover the first weeks of Jesus’ public life: the days are counted off, one by one. At the centre of this section we find the feast of the Passover, the first such feast in our Lord’s public ministry. During his stay in Jerusalem he cleanses the temple (cf. 2:13–25) and converses with Nicodemus (cf. 3:1–21). The section ends with the Baptist’s last testimony to Jesus (cf. 3:22–36) and Jesus’ return from Jerusalem through Samaria, where he has the meeting with the Samaritan woman (cf. 4:1–42), and through Galilee, where he works the second miracle, curing the son of the royal official (cf. 4:46–54).

The whole section is given unity by the fact that our Lord is showing himself to be the founder of the new economy of grace, an economy superior to that of the temple and the Old Law. This is clearly reflected in the changing of the water into wine at Cana in Galilee (cf. 2:9); in St John’s comment on the episode of the cleansing of the temple (“he spoke of the temple of his body”: 2:21); in the revelation to Nicodemus about new birth through Baptism (cf. 3:5); and in our Lord’s conversation with the Samaritan woman, where he lays down that true adoration should be “in spirit and truth” (4:24). This manifestation of the Lord causes his disciples (cf. 1:50; 2:11) and the people (cf. 2:23; 4:42–53) to begin to have faith in him, and also causes the first signs of rejection on the part of some Jews (cf. 2:24–25; 3:11, 18, etc.).

3. *Jesus reveals his divinity* (chap. 5). St John relates the curing of a paralyzed man at the pool of Bethzatha (cf. 5:1–18) and then goes on to give us one of our Lord’s discourses, where he reveals that he acts in union with the Father because he is the Father’s Son. All this happens on “a feast of the Jews” (5:1), which could be Passover or perhaps the feast of Pentecost, which falls fifty days after Passover. This new manifestation of our Lord, in which he clearly states his divinity, both through the miracle and through what he says in the discourse, provokes some Jews to open hatred: from then on they “sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his Father, making him equal with God” (5:18).

4. *Jesus is the bread of life* (chap. 6). This has a structure very like that of the previous chapter: first, two miracles—the multiplication of the loaves and fish, and Jesus’ walking on the water; and then a discourse—that of the synagogue of Capernaum, in which the Lord reveals himself as the Bread of Life, announcing the mystery of the Blessed Eucharist. St John points out that this occurred when “the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand” (6:4), thereby hinting that the eucharistic banquet would in the future be the New Passover. Many of his followers were scandalized by these words of Jesus, so much so that those who chose not to believe left him, and those who believed grew more attached to him: “After this many of his disciples



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drew back and no longer went about with him” (6:66); whereas Simon Peter, speaking for the Twelve, confessed “we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:69), that is, the Messiah, the Son of God.

From chapter 7 onwards it is not so easy to divide the narrative into such distinct sections. The five remaining chapters of the first part certainly have some basic cohesion in that Jerusalem or its environs provides the setting. Jesus reveals himself as Light and Life of the world, and opposition becomes more and more pronounced. However, we will divide these chapters into two sections, centering on two great miracles, in which Jesus reveals himself as Light and Life.

5. *Jesus is the light of the world* (chaps. 7–10). It opens with the observation that “Jesus went about in Galilee; he would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill him” (7:1). But, because it was the feast of Tabernacles, “about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught” (7:14). This visit to Jerusalem gives our Lord an opportunity to show himself more clearly to the Jewish authorities and to the people; everyone is talking about him. Jesus teaches that he has been sent by the Father (cf. 7:28–29). The Jewish authorities want to arrest him, but they do not do so because, St John remarks, “his hour had not yet come” (7:30). On the last day of the feast Jesus reveals himself as the one the Holy Spirit is to send—which again leads to division among the people. For some he is the Messiah, “the Christ” (7:41); for others—the chief priests and Pharisees—he is not, and they want to arrest him for blasphemy, but they do not dare (cf. 7:44ff).

At dawn the next day Jesus returns to the temple to teach, and the episode of the adulterous woman occurs (cf. 8:1–11). Then Jesus reveals himself as “the light of the world” (8:12), sent by the Father (cf. 8:16), equal to God (cf. 8:19), greater than Abraham (cf. 8:58). People become so angry they want to stone him (cf. 8:59).

But Jesus also reveals he is the Light of the world by performing a miracle, a sign proving the truth of what he is saying—the miracle of curing a man born blind (cf. 9:1–38), which provides our Lord with an occasion to speak to us about God’s judgment: “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind” (9:39). The man who has been cured, who now confesses his faith in Christ, is a model for all believers; whereas the Pharisees, who are full of pride, which they disguise with religiosity, become blind by rejecting Christ, the Light of the world.

Only through faith in Christ and by his grace can man attain salvation, for he is “the door of entry to eternal life” (10:7–10), “the Good shepherd” who guides us and has given his life for us (10:11–18). This revelation causes more arguments among the Jews, with some saying that he is possessed by a devil and others recognizing that he has worked a miracle (cf. 10:19–21).

6. *Jesus and the Father*. Then comes a further manifestation of our Lord, on the occasion of the feast of the Dedication of the Temple: it is wintertime and Jesus is walking in the portico of Solomon (cf. 10:22–23); the Jews ask him to tell them openly if he is the Christ, to which he replies that he is the Son of God, equal to the Father: “I and the Father are one” (10:30) and “the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (10:38). The Jews realize perfectly well that he is revealing himself as God; so they try once more to stone him (cf. 10:31) and arrest him (cf. 10:39); but he goes away across the Jordan, and many people follow him and believe in him (cf. 10:42).

7. *Jesus is the life of the world* (chaps. 11–12). The outstanding event here is the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus took occasion of this to reveal that he is “the resurrection and the life” for those who believe in him (11:25). Martha’s reaction of faith also stands out: “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world” (11:27), as does the Pharisees’ reaction, which is one of hatred: they meet in council and formally decide to put him to death (cf. 11:45–53). St John observes that “the Passover of the Jews was at hand” (11:55), which suggests that these events and those of chapter 12 are to herald Christ’s redemptive death and glorious resurrection.

8. *Jesus is acclaimed as the messianic king*. Our Lord in fact links the anointing at Bethany, which takes place six days before the Passover, with the day of his burial (cf. 12:1, 7).

The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is an anticipation of Jesus’ glorification in the Resurrection, which is why St John comments that “his disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified,



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then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him” (12:16). Our Lord’s own words, announcing that the hour has come for his glorification through death on the cross and resurrection (cf. 12:23ff, 33), are a last invitation to men to believe in him (cf. 12:35–36). Many people, even many prominent Jews, believe in him; others prefer the glory of men (12:42); but those who do not receive Jesus’ words will be condemned by those very words on the last day (12:48).

This brings us to the end of the first part of the Gospel, in which Jesus progressively reveals himself as the Messiah, through his miracles (a sign of his divinity) and through his words, in which he declares that he is the Messiah, the Son of God and equal to the Father. All this moves in a dramatic crescendo to Jesus’ “hour”, culminating in his death and resurrection, which are the subject of the second part of the Gospel.

PART TWO: JESUS IS MANIFESTED AS THE MESSIAH, SON OF GOD, IN HIS PASSION, DEATH AND RESURRECTION

In this second part there are three sections dealing with the Last Supper, the passion and death of our Lord, and his resurrection. In each of the three we find Christ being revealed, and people reacting to him in different ways; the point of climax is imminent.

9. *The Last Supper* (chaps. 13–17). Jesus’ revelation to his disciples in the intimacy of the Last Supper is given. It begins with St John informing us that it was the eve of the feast of the Passover “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father” (Jn 13:1). This section comprises, firstly, the account of the washing of feet and the prediction of Judas’ betrayal. Christ’s love contrasts with the Jews’ hatred. Probably St John purposely points out that when Judas left the room “it was night” (13:30), for if one leaves the light of Christ one is submerged in the kingdom of darkness and unbelief. The Lord’s discourses follow, running up to chapter 16. It is not easy to impose a pattern on them, but basically there are three main themes: first, love—*agape*—which has its root in Christ’s love and becomes the commandment of the Lord (cf. 13:34–35; 15:11–17); second, the consolation Jesus gives his disciples before he leaves them (cf. 13:33; 14:1–7), by saying he will return (cf. 14:1–3; 16:16–26) and by promising that he will send the Holy Spirit, who is called here the Paraclete (Counsellor) and who will lead them to all truth (14:15–17, 26; 16:5–15); thirdly, Christ’s solidarity with his disciples, using the simile of the vine and the branches, a unity based on love and on keeping the commandments (cf. 15:1–11). Along with these subjects, there is Jesus’ revelation that he is God (cf. 14:10) and also his prediction of the hatred the world will show his disciples (cf. 15:18–16:4). The section concludes with Christ’s priestly prayer (chap. 17), which once again brings in the subjects of his glorification and his disciples’ faith and unity, for which he prays to the Father.

10. *The passion and death of Jesus* (chaps. 18–19). It contains the account of our Lord’s passion. The narrative follows the course of events of that night and of the morning of Good Friday: arrest, interrogation before Annas and Caiaphas, and Peter’s denials (cf. 18:1–27); the trial before Pontius Pilate (cf. 18:28–19:26); crucifixion, death and burial (19:17–42). The sacred text gives lots of details which emphasize that the Passion is the supreme manifestation of Christ as Messiah-King and of his glory: when he says, “I am he”, the people who have come to arrest him draw back and fall to the ground; to Pilate he declares that he is a king (cf. 18:33–37; 19:2–3, 19–22); and he shows that he has full knowledge and control of these events (cf. 18:4; 19:28) whereby his Father’s will is being fulfilled (cf. 18:11; 19:30). Christ is the new passover lamb, by whose redemptive death the sin of the world is taken away (cf. 19:31; 1:29). From Jesus’ side, water flows as well as blood, symbolizing Baptism and the promised Holy Spirit (cf. 7:37–39).

The Passion marks the climax of the Jews’ and the world’s hatred of Christ; it is the hour of the powers of darkness, affecting even his disciples, for they abandon him or deny him (cf. 18:25–27). But at the foot of the cross the supreme confession of faith in Jesus also takes place—the faith of the Blessed Virgin, whom our Lord makes Mother of mankind, mankind being represented by the beloved disciple, St John (cf. 19:25–27).

11. *Appearances of the risen Christ* (chaps. 20–21). This completes the glorious manifestation of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, the story of which St John has told to strengthen our faith (cf. 20:31). This section contains the resurrection of the Lord as revealed in the empty tomb (cf. 20:1–10), and in his appearances to Mary Magdalene (cf. 20:11–18) and to the disciples (cf. 20:19–29). The resurrection, closely linked with



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the passion and death, is the climax of Christ's revelation. After the events of Holy Week, enlightened now by the Holy Spirit, the apostles grasp the meaning of the Old Testament prophecies about Christ, and also of what he himself said and did (cf. 20:8–9; 2:22; 12:16). The risen Christ gives the apostles the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins (cf. 20:22–23), and praises all those who, unlike St Thomas, believe without having seen him (cf. 20:29). The account of the miraculous draught of fish at the Sea of Tiberias (cf. 21:1–14) prefigures the multitude of people whom the Church will bring to Christ; into this ecclesiological context fits the rest of chapter 21, which tells of St Peter being given the primacy of the Church (cf. 21:15–19). The Gospel concludes with a statement of the truthfulness of the testimony borne by the Evangelist, who has seen and heard the things he has recounted (cf. 21:24–25).

DOCTRINAL CONTENT THE BLESSED TRINITY

St John's Gospel is the most explicit New Testament document as far as revelation of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity is concerned—as can be seen, for example, by the fact that St Augustine devotes a lot of space to the study of this mystery in his *Treatise on the Gospel of St John*. The Evangelist enters deep into this unfathomable mystery, quoting the words of Christ, the Only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father and who becomes man in order to tell us the secret of God's intimate inner life (cf. Jn 1:18). This is the reason why the Fourth Gospel particularly has been attacked by those who do not accept the divinity of Jesus Christ; whereas it is constantly quoted by the Magisterium of the Church when it is explaining and giving dogmatic formulation to the mystery of the Trinity or anything to do with the Incarnation of the Word.

At the very beginning the Gospel asserts that the Word is God, and also that he is one in substance with the Father: when it says that “the Word was with God”, the original Greek is very precise because it uses the word *Theos* with the article when it means the Person of the Father, and without the article when it refers to the divine essence. Later on, the Gospel speaks about the oneness of God and also about each of the three divine Persons. Of the One God it affirms that he has sent the Baptist (cf. 1:6), that we are born of him to the life of grace (cf. 1:12–13), that no one has ever seen him (cf. 1:18), and that in him are good deeds done (cf. 3:21); the oneness of God is proclaimed with tremendous force (cf. 5:44). But also each of the three divine Persons is often referred to. The Gospel introduces the Word as the only Son of the Father (cf. 1:14), and throughout Jesus will speak again and again about his Father: for example, on the two occasions when he prays out loud he begins with the word “Father” (11:41; 17:1). While making this distinction between himself and the Father, he also says that they share the same nature: “I and the Father are one” (10:30). On other occasions, he says that if they knew him, they “would know the Father also” (8:19; cf. 14:8–11), and that the Father is in him and he is in the Father (cf. 10:34–39). Jesus also teaches that God is his Father in a different way from which he is the Father of men: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God ...” (20:17). This relationship of the Christian as son to his Father God, which is already taught in the prologue to the Gospel (cf. 1:12–13), is something which causes St John to exclaim: “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 Jn 3:1).

The Incarnate Word is the beginning, centre and end of the Fourth Gospel: it begins by telling us that the Word was God and was with God. We should remember that the tense used here expresses the idea of the timelessness of eternity. The Word is the envoy of the Father (cf. 3:17–34; 5:36; 6:57; 7:33; etc.); the greatest possible expression of God's love for the world is the fact that God gave it his only Son (cf. 3:16). Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, is God's definitive rapprochement to mankind; in his most holy human nature the great God himself is made manifest (cf. Heb 1:1ff). This is why he complains when his disciples, after being with him for so long, ask him to show them the Father: when they see him they are seeing the Father also (cf. Jn 14:8–11); not only himself and his words, but his whole life, everything he does (cf. 9:4; 10:32–37; 14:12) and particularly his death and resurrection, reveal the Father. The Gospel of St John frequently tells us that Christ reveals the Father to us, and this saving revelation reaches its climax on the cross, where Christ is raised up, enthroned above the earth, which he embraces as its King. Jesus Christ crucified is thus the supreme expression of God's salvific love. Just as the bronze serpent was raised up in



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the wilderness to save those who had been bitten by the snakes, “so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (3:14–15). This is what Christ means also when he says (12:32): “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

The Fourth Gospel also reveals the existence of the Holy Spirit as a distinct transcendent Person. In the Baptist’s testimony of Jesus as “Son of God” (1:34), the unmistakable sign given is the descent of the Spirit over the Messiah in the form of a dove—the Messiah who will baptize in the Holy Spirit, whereas the Precursor’s baptism is with water: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (3:5). This relationship between water and the Spirit reappears in 7:37–39, where our Lord says that rivers of living water will flow out of him who believes in him, and the Evangelist explains that “this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (7:39). This water/Spirit relationship is hinted at in the Old Testament (cf. Gen 1:2; Ezek 36:25–27), implying the power which water is given through the Spirit.

At the Last Supper, and after the Resurrection, the Evangelist gives us Jesus’ words on the third Person of the Blessed Trinity and his sanctifying action: Jesus says that he will pray the Father to send them “another Counsellor”, “the Spirit of truth” (14:16–17; 15:26; 16:13). The Father will listen to Christ’s prayer and will send “the Holy Spirit” (14:26), who proceeds from the Father and the Son and says what the Son gives him to say (cf. 16:13–15). Thus, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, who send him to their own who are still in the world.

The Holy Spirit, then, is the Counsellor who will always be with those who believe in Christ, making his home in them (cf. 14:16–17); he it is also who will remind them of all that Jesus has taught them and who will enlighten them to understand the true meaning of those words (cf. 14:26). He will bear witness to Christ for the apostles as they in their turn will do for other men (cf. 15:26–27). The Holy Spirit will also proclaim to them everything to do with the mystery of salvation (cf. 16:14–15). Under his sure guidance the disciples will reach all truth (cf. 16:13).

Then, after rising from the dead, Jesus breathes on his disciples and says: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (20:22–23). This outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins is, as it were, a joyful anticipation of the definitive outpouring at Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1ff), and, together with the regeneration worked by Baptism, the most moving expression of God’s mercy whereby the sacrament of Penance is instituted to bring us God’s forgiveness.

FAITH

St John actually says that he has written his Gospel “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31). Faith in Jesus Christ leads to eternal life, because through faith we become united to Jesus and share in his victory over sin and death: “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith” (1 Jn 5:4); and because by believing we fulfil *the commandment* of the Lord: “This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 3:23). Faith is our loving response to God’s love for us as manifested in Christ: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). Jesus showed us how important faith is when he worked his miracles; for example, before raising Lazarus from the dead he says to Martha: “whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (11:26; cf. also 5:24; 6:40; 6:47; etc.).

People adopt one of two attitudes to Revelation. Some believe, and by doing so they already share in some way in eternal life: “he who believes in the Son has eternal life” (3:36; cf. 3:18; 5:24; etc.); others do not believe and therefore they are already condemned by God: “he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (3:18; cf. 3:36; etc.).

The Fourth Gospel is a living testimony designed to strengthen our faith in eternal life (cf. 20:31). Faith in Jesus Christ has a reasonable basis in the witness borne by those who saw and heard Jesus (cf. Jn 21:24; Lk 1:1–4) and who faithfully pass on to us what Jesus did and taught. So, believing means knowing revealed truth or, better, recognizing the authority of God revealing truth. In fact, in this Gospel we often find the verbs “to believe” and “to know” side by side in the one phrase; sometimes they seem to be interchangeable



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(cf. Jn 6:69; 17:8; etc.). The verb “to know” has the meaning not just of knowing intellectually, of grasping the truth; it takes on an Old Testament meaning, indicating unreserved adhesion to the Truth that is Jesus Christ. Therefore, faith includes the act of trusting commitment as well as the act of knowing. Recognizing supernatural truth through the testimony given us, we adhere to that truth and, by accepting it with our whole heart, we obtain deep knowledge of God’s truth.

There are different degrees of faith. The Gospel shows us the apostles’ faith growing. It tells us that our Lord was unable to trust some of those who had faith, because their faith was still weak (cf. 2:23ff). Growth in faith goes hand in hand with growth in knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Faith is at one and the same time a free gift of God and a free action on man’s part: man reaches genuine freedom to believe when God gives him the grace which enables him to adhere to revealed truths; but as long as man is a wayfarer in this life, freedom means that he can ultimately reject God’s gift. Jesus keeps on exhorting people to believe in him, because men, being free, can reject him (cf. 8:24; 3:36; 15:22; etc.), despite the good reasons they have for believing. But at the same time it is the Son of God himself who gives us understanding to believe (cf. 1 Jn 5:20), and no one can believe in him unless it is granted him by the Father (cf. Jn 6:65).

To sum up: faith is the result of God’s action which attests to Christ by means of apostolic preaching; and it is also the result of man’s freedom, whereby man recognizes the truth of the testimony God has given him and surrenders himself to Christ freely and joyfully.

CHARITY

Charity is the favourite theme of the beloved disciple of Jesus, “on whose breast he rested at the Supper, which means that he drank of the deepest secrets of (Jesus’) heart.” He had experienced Christ’s love in a special way and was therefore in a unique position to teach us how to be loved by Jesus and how to love him.²⁰

It is God who takes the initiative in love (cf. Jn 1:11; 4:7; 15:16; 1 Jn 4:10), which shows that it is he who loves most. Love can be measured by the value of the gift that is given, and God gives us what he most values, what he most loves, his own Son: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16), him whom he most loved, who most pleased him (cf. Mt 3:17).

The supreme expression of this love occurred in the sacrifice of the cross. When Abraham was about to sacrifice his only son, God stayed his hand, but he does not prevent men from nailing his own Son to the Cross—which leads St Paul to exclaim, full of hope: “He who did not spare his own Son [...], will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rom 8:32).

Seeing that God loves him so much, man feels obliged to respond, to practise the great truth that love can be repaid only with love. Man has been created “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27), and “God”, St John tells us, “is love” (1 Jn 4:8). It follows that man’s heart is made to love, and the more he loves, the more he becomes one with God: only when he loves can he be happy. God wants us to be happy, in this life as well as in the next. St John gives us deep insights into Jesus’ teaching on charity, not only through what Jesus says, but particularly by his narrative of our Lord’s life (cf. Acts 1:1).

The best proof of love is fidelity, an unswerving loyalty, total commitment to God’s will: Jesus shows us his hunger to do the will of his Father and he tells us that his food is to do the will of him who sent him (cf. Jn 4:34). “I have kept my Father’s commandments”, our Lord says, “and abide in his love” (15:10). Jesus asserts that the world knows that he loves the Father and does what the Father has commanded him (cf. 14:31). This supreme love leads him also to love the world and man, for the lover cannot cease loving what he loves (cf. 3:16), nor can one love a father without loving his children also. All men are called to become children of God through the grace of Baptism (cf. 1:12–13; 3:3). If the Father loves the world and men, then Jesus also loves them. This love brought him even to die for them. After speaking about how right it was for the world to know that he loves the Father, he adds: “Rise, let us go hence” (14:31), showing us how eager he is to give himself, for he is on his way to Gethsemane to meet his passion and death. Jesus sacrifices himself totally, as a good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep (cf. 10:11). He rightly says that no one has greater love than he who gives up his life for the loved one (cf. 15:13): St John explains that having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (cf. 13:1; 19:28).



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St John lays special emphasis on Jesus' love, in both its divine and its human dimensions. We are shown how much he loved his friend Lazarus, and Martha and Mary (cf. 11:5); when his friend dies he makes his way to the tomb and he cannot help crying—and the people realize how deeply he loved Lazarus (cf. 11:33, 35).

Jesus has given us an example to imitate (cf. 13:15). The apostles responded to the love he showed them: "the Father himself loves you," the Master assures them, "because you have loved me and have believed that I come from the Father" (16:27). They all protest their love when Jesus tells them he is going to be betrayed (cf. Mt 26:35; Mk 14:31): "I will lay down my life for you", St Peter says (Jn 13:37). They respond in their own way to Christ's love; but the Lord points out that only he who keeps the commandments really loves him (cf. 14:21); this is a constant in his teaching: they remain in his love by keeping his commandments (cf. 15:9–10).

There is also a second commandment, which is like the first: we should imitate Christ not only in his love for his Father but also in his love for the brethren (cf. 15:9). Three times in the Last Supper our Lord gives the commandment to love: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (13:34; cf. 15:12, 17). This will be the special characteristic of his true disciple, the distinguishing mark of the Christian. "Only charity distinguishes the children of God from the children of the devil. Though all may mark themselves with the sign of the cross of Christ, though all may say Amen, though all sing alleluia, though they enter the Church, though they build basilicas, nothing will distinguish the children of God from the children of the devil unless it be charity. Those who have love are born of God, those who have not, are not [...]; charity is the precious pearl (Mt 13:46); if you have it, that alone suffices." Love is the source of the unity which Jesus prays for in his last prayer on this unforgettable night: "I in them and them in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me" (Jn 17:23). Only through charity will people recognize the sign of the Redemption (cf. 17:21).

God wants what is best for us, what makes for our happiness and joy—which is precisely why he lays down the law of charity. In the Last Supper, also, the Master teaches the meaning of joy: seeing how sad the apostles are because they sense that he is leaving them, he tells them that if they loved him, they would be in fact rejoicing, to see him so near his moment of triumph (cf. 14:28). After speaking to them about persevering in his love and keeping faith with him, he assures them that he is telling them all this so that they can share his own joy: their joy, even in the midst of the difficulties of this life, will be full (cf. 15:11). He does not hide from them the difficulties that lie ahead; yet he assures them that their sorrow will turn into joy: "You have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (16:22). And in fact the return of the risen Jesus did fill them with hope and joy; our Lord's words, which they could not understand when they heard them first, came completely true: the Acts of the Apostles tells us how they left the Sanhedrin after being beaten, happy that they had suffered for the Lord (cf. Acts 5:40): charity had given them perfect joy (cf. Jn 16:24)

THE SACRAMENTS

St John often mentions different Jewish feasts, especially the Passover. He refers to four occasions of this great festival (2:13, 23; 5:1; 6:4; 12:1), unlike the Synoptics, which only refer to the Passover at which Jesus died. John's Gospel also refers to the deep, mysterious link between our Lord's own body and the temple of Jerusalem: the temple was the symbol of God's presence among men, a presence which was realized perfectly in Christ's human nature (cf. 2:19). In the book of Revelation it says that there will be no temple in the heavenly Jerusalem, for the Lamb of God will be the temple, Jesus Christ, forever victorious (cf. Rev 21:22).

All these festivals are a prelude to Christian celebrations, and the old Passover yields to a new one in which Christ is the perfect victim who brings about our redemption (cf. 1 Cor 5:7). St John here hints at the importance of liturgy in the sanctification of men through Christ, our Pasch.

The Evangelist goes from the sphere of the senses to that of the spirit; he discloses to us that behind our Lord's actions lie certain supernatural, saving realities, and that through Christ's human nature the splendour of his divinity is made manifest. All this is closely connected with the basic principle of the



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sacramental system: material, visible, natural elements are instruments which God selects to signify and produce invisible grace, the sanctification of the soul.

In a broad sense it can be said that Christ is the Sacrament of the Father, and “the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men.” Here Vatican II is speaking of a “sacrament” not in the strict sense in which the essence of the sacraments of the New Alliance is dogmatically defined (for Trent categorically states that, strictly speaking, there are only seven sacraments).²³ Of these seven sacraments St John refers explicitly to Baptism, Eucharist and Penance. We can say that he also speaks of Confirmation, Marriage and priestly Order, though not in a direct way. As regards Confirmation he includes Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit to the apostles (cf. Jn 14:26; 16:13), who will confirm them in the mission entrusted to them and guide them into all truth. On Marriage there is a passage which is usually regarded as important—the wedding at Cana (cf. 2:1–11). “Our Lord, in coming to the wedding, to which he had been invited,” St Augustine says, “wished to enhance it and to confirm again that he is the author of marriage.” It can also be said that in this event there is a clear echo of Christ’s espousal of the Church, which the prophets had foretold (cf. Is 54:4–8; 62:4–5; Ezek 16; etc.) and which St Paul takes up when he speaks about marriage as *sacramentum magnum* (Eph 5:3), a great sacrament, and refers to Jesus Christ as spouse of the Church (cf. Eph 5:27). In the book of Revelation St John also speaks about the wedding between the Lamb and the new Bride, the new Jerusalem, “coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2). As far as priestly Order is concerned, this sacrament is covered in what is called “the priestly prayer of Jesus” (cf. Jn 17), where our Lord intercedes as High Priest before the Eternal Father on behalf of his own and offers himself as a holy victim “that they also may be consecrated in truth” (17:19).

As regards Baptism, Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus (cf. Jn 3:1–21) can be seen as really a form of baptismal instruction: it is necessary to be born again of water and the Spirit to be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven. (In Romans 6, St Paul speaks about this new life which is infused by Baptism.) And the episode at the pool of Bethzatha (cf. Jn 5) prefigures the baptismal rite of the early Church: the neophytes, on leaving the water after the words of Baptism have been spoken over them, are cleared of all sin and reborn into the life of grace.

Chapter 6 of the Gospel deals almost entirely with the Blessed Eucharist. Our Lord uses the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fish (also recounted in the Synoptics) to explain in detail his teaching about the Bread of Life, the Bread which has come down from heaven to give eternal life. His words are clear and final: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (6:53). “My flesh,” Jesus says, “is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (6:55–56). Our Lord could not have spoken in a more explicit, more realistic, way about his own sacrifice: by which, after dying in a bloody way on the cross, he gives himself to us in the Eucharist, in an unbloody way as nourishment for our soul and leads us to the closest intimacy with God.

In this chapter there is an allusion to the Old Testament: “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God’” (6:45), the prophets being Isaiah and Jeremiah (cf. Is 54:13 and Jer 31:33), who were referring to the messianic times, when the people of God would be given a New Law written on their hearts, times when God would seal a New Alliance by the sacrifice of the Messiah. By this reference to the Old Testament, our Lord is teaching that the messianic times have arrived, and that the New Alliance is ratified by the sacrifice of Christ, who brings “eternal life” through his death (6:54). The institution of the Eucharist reminds us of all this.

The Gospel speaks about the sacrament of Penance when the risen Lord appears to the apostles in the Cenacle: “‘As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (20:21–23). According to the interpretation authorized by the Magisterium of the Church, this passage refers to the institution of the sacrament of Penance.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

The apostle St John also found himself in a privileged position in relation to our Lady, for Jesus entrusted his Mother to John just before he died on the cross. From then on she would always be close to him, and to him, as to none other, she could speak about everything she kept in her heart (cf. Lk 2:51).

In Mary, the Gospel says, the Word became flesh. The very Son of the Eternal Father became Son of man, to enable the sons of men to become sons of God. The Song of Consolation (cf. Is 40:1–11) had spoken of God coming to those who suffered: now God himself will personally guide his people in a new exodus to the Promised Land. Once she consents to the Word becoming flesh, the Mother of God retires into the background; this is to be her usual role in the Gospel—that of passing unnoticed, especially at Jesus' moments of glory. Later, as no other creature does, she will share in Christ's glorious triumph, and it will be John who describes her in all her splendour: “A great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Rev 12:1).

In John 2:1–11 the wedding at Cana is described, and in 19:25–27 we are told of Mary’s presence on Calvary. The two accounts are quite in parallel: in both she is described as the Mother of Jesus and in both our Lord refers to her as “woman”. At both Cana and Calvary Jesus’ “hour” is referred to—in the first case as something which has not yet arrived, and in the second as a present fact. This “hour” of Jesus is something which marks his whole life until it culminates in the cross (cf. Jn 7:30; 8:20; 12:27; 13:1; 17:1). “When he had done everything which he judged it appropriate to do”, St Augustine says, “that is when the appointed hour arrived—through his will and not of necessity, through his power and no exigency of any kind.” And St Thomas Aquinas says, “the hour of the Passion is to be understood not as imposed by necessity but as determined by divine providence.”²⁸

The first thing one notices in the story of the wedding at Cana is Mary’s exquisite charity and her absolute faith in Jesus’ power. We can also see that here, as at Calvary, Mary has a role closely linked with the Messiah’s role as Redeemer. When Jesus changes into wine the water set aside for Jewish ritual purification, he is implying that the messianic times have begun. For, in the prophecies wine symbolizes the times of the Messiah, when the vats will be full of good wine (cf. Amos 9:13ff; Joel 2:24; 4:18), and on Mount Zion a feast will be celebrated with succulent food and fine wines (cf. Is 25:6). Jesus himself speaks about the fruit of the vine which will be drunk in the Kingdom (cf. Mt 26:29), and contrasts the new wine with the old (Mk 2:22). The wedding feast also evokes the marriage banquet for Yahweh and the daughter of Zion, meaning the Old Alliance (cf. Is 54:4–8; 62:4–5; Ezek 16), just as Christ’s espousal of the Church means the New Alliance (cf. Eph 5:25; Rev 21), which is also alluded to in certain parables (cf. Mt 22:1–14; 25:1–13). All of which implies that the figure of the Virgin Mary and the words which refer to her should be contemplated in the light of the messianic meaning of the whole passage.

The Fourth Gospel contemplates Mary’s divine motherhood in all its fulness, aware that she is the Mother not only of the head but also of the members of Christ’s mystical body. This is why, instead of referring to Mary by name, the Fourth Gospel uses the titles of “Mother of Jesus” and “woman”, which have a special significance connected with her spiritual motherhood; this is why at Cana, Jesus calls his Mother “woman” (Jn 2:4). Similarly in 19:25–27, where the Gospel speaks of our Lady’s presence on Calvary, our Lord’s words have a deeper meaning than might at first appear. After entrusting his Mother to the care of John, Jesus announces that his mission is accomplished (cf. 19:28); only “now”, not before. His announcement that Mary is the Mother of the beloved disciple, therefore, establishes her role in the work of salvation which has at that moment reached its climax: in addition to being a son’s act of devotion it has a more transcendental meaning—Mary’s spiritual maternity. This is the moment at which the Virgin Mary’s co-redemption acquires its full force and meaning. Now we can indeed see how closely united Mary is to Jesus, now her divine motherhood attains its full measure, now she is made spiritual Mother of all believers. The beloved disciple stands for all those who will follow the Master and who in the apostle John receive Mary as their Mother.

The word “woman” also implies a certain solemnity and contains a special emphasis: most authors are inclined to see in this title given to Mary a clear allusion to the “protoevangelium” (cf. Gen 3:15), which speaks of the triumph of the woman and her seed over the serpent. In addition to being endorsed by the text itself (the use of the word “woman”), this allusion is confirmed by interpretations given by the Fathers when



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they speak of the parallelism between Eve and Mary, a parallelism similar to that between Adam and Christ (cf. Rom 5:12–14). In Christ’s death that triumph over the serpent takes place, because by dying Jesus redeems us from slavery to the devil. *Mors per Evam, vita per Mariam*, death came upon us through Eve, Mary brings us life. “The first Eve,” St Irenaeus teaches, “disobeyed God; but the second obeyed him; and so the Virgin Mary can be the advocate of the virgin Eve.”³⁰ Our Lady “in a wholly singular way cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Saviour in restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a Mother to us in the order of grace” and “continues in heaven her maternal role towards the members of Christ, in that she cooperates with the birth and growth of divine life in the souls of the redeemed”.³²

Origen comments: “We dare to say that the Gospels are the flower of the Scriptures, and the flower of the Gospels is that of St John. But no one can penetrate its meaning who has not rested on Jesus’ breast and taken Mary as his Mother. To be like John one needs to be able, like him, to be pointed out by Jesus as another Jesus. And so, if Mary had no other children but Jesus, and Jesus says to his Mother: ‘Behold, your son’ and not ‘Behold, another son’, then it is as if he were saying, ‘Behold, Jesus, to whom you have given life.’ And so it is: anyone who has identified with Christ, no longer lives for himself: Christ lives in him (cf. Gal 2:20), and given that Christ lives in him, Jesus says of him to Mary: ‘Behold, your son—Christ’.”

We have received through Baptism, by sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Rom 6:1–14), the gift of divine sonship (cf. Jn 1:12–13), but in order to become completely one with Jesus, “we have to join him through faith, letting his life show forth in ours to such an extent that each Christian is not simply *alter Christus*, another Christ, but also *ipse Christus*, Christ himself!”⁸

**The Message of John
Here is your King!**

Bruce Milne

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InterVarsity Press

InterVarsity Press, USA

P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426, USA

World Wide Web: www.ivypress.com

Email: email@ivpress.com

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Norton Street, Nottingham NG7 3HR, England

Website: www.ivpbooks.com

Email: ivp@ivpbooks.com

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⁸ *Saint John's Gospel*. (2005). (pp. 11–36). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.



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USA ISBN: 978-0-8308-1233-4

UK ISBN: 978-0-85110-971-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Milne, Bruce.

The message of John: here is your king!/Bruce Milne.

p. cm.—(The Bible speaks today)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-85110-971-3.—ISBN 0-8308-1233-4 (U.S.)

1. Bible N.T. John—Commentaries. I. Title. II. Series.

BS2615.3.M55 1993

226.5'07—dc20

93-8158

CIP

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

General preface

The Bible Speaks Today describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER

JOHN STOTT

DEREK TIDBALL

Series editors

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Anyone attempting an exposition of John's gospel, however modest, faces a daunting challenge. Apart from the formidable demands of the text itself, the voluminous secondary literature poses a prodigious obstacle. The pages which follow make no claim to establish new critical landmarks; the New Testament specialist, should he or she chance to open these pages, will not discover any blazing new insights on the celebrated textual and theological problems which surround this gospel. As far as the latter are concerned I have been content to stand on the shoulders of others (though hopefully without surrendering an independent judgment). My particular debts in that regard will be evident from the footnotes.

In keeping with the goals of *The Bible Speaks Today* series, this volume is written for the thoughtful lay person (rather than the specialist) who seeks a deeper appreciation of the text of the gospel, and wishes for help in relating its message to the world of today. In particular I have tried to heed the plea of the General Editor, John Stott, that I have in special view 'the hard-pressed preacher', whether lay or clerical. Belonging to that company of preachers on a daily basis made my pursuit of that goal a little easier!

The gospel of John, as my former teacher George Beasley-Murray points out, is 'the preacher's gospel *par excellence*' (*John*, p. x). More than thirty years ago, I stood for the very first time in a Christian pulpit of a tiny windswept church in the remoter reaches of the Shetland Islands before a handful of long-suffering fisherfolk. Then I chose my text from John 6:35, 'I am the bread of life', neither the first nor last preacher to begin a pulpit career from this great gospel.

The fascination of John continues undiminished, its challenge unending. If these pages make even the slightest contribution to that renewal of expository preaching which, in this writer's judgment, remains the single most urgent need of the modern church, the author will be more than compensated for any effort expended in their production.

My most sincere thanks are due to the Council and members of the very special church I am privileged to serve, First Baptist, Vancouver, for three months' leave during the summer of 1991 to tackle this project. In particular I am indebted to Edith Paul, widow of one of my distinguished predecessors at First Baptist, for a peaceful hideaway in her home to install my computer, as well as the inspiration of her exquisite garden, and to Stephen Morton, another 'gift' from the congregation, whose contribution to the technical production of the manuscript is impossible to quantify. My thanks are also due to Herb Adams, who took time off from writing mathematics textbooks to correct the proofs.

My dear wife Valerie, as well as offering many editorial suggestions for improving the text, was an inspiration throughout.



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The impact on the history of the world of John's twenty-one brief chapters is in the end incalculable. For all the controversy which continues to surround them they comprise a moral and spiritual potency which over the centuries has transformed communities, toppled kingdoms, liberated multitudes, and remade human character on a scale without parallel in the accumulated literature of the ages. That power remains present in this gospel, and the reader, whether Christian or non-Christian, can discover it today. Simply put, in the paragraphs of John's gospel the living Lord Jesus Christ is met in his glory and grace, his majesty and tenderness, and his presence can be experienced as a perceptible reality in your life. 'These are written ... that by believing you may have life in his name' (20:31). May I challenge you to test that claim—and make the incomparable discovery that it happens to be true!

Vancouver

Bruce Milne

September 1992

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Abbreviations

AV	The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible (1611).
Gk.	Greek
JBP	<i>The New Testament in Modern English</i> by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).
LXX	The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, 3rd century BC.
NASB	The New American Standard Bible, 1963.
NIV	The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).
RSV	The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946, 2nd edition 1971; OT 1952).
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, translated into English by G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Eerdmans, 1964–1976).

Introduction

1. Authorship

Most books published today begin with a title page identifying the author. When 'John's gospel' was first published, however, that initial authorial identification was omitted, and readers have to wait until near the end of the book before finding out who the writer is. Even then we are not entirely out of the dark, for he is identified simply as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (21:20) who 'is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down'.

From one point of view the relative anonymity of the human author is not of ultimate importance since the true author is the divine Holy Spirit, whose superintendency of the human witness is attested at several points in the gospel. Elsewhere, the book of Hebrews, for example, contains a writing which is anonymous and yet whose inspiration and canonicity are hardly in question. While that point is conceded, however, it is not unimportant for purposes of interpretation to try to clarify the human process by which a book came to be written. Furthermore, in the case of a gospel which is a record of events, the historical reliability and eyewitness credentials of the author are necessarily important considerations.

Traditionally the fourth gospel has been attributed to John, son of Zebedee, one of the 'inner circle' of Jesus' twelve disciples, and subsequently a leading apostle in the emergent church. The grounds for this attribution are strong ones. We can distinguish between *internal grounds* (evidence within the gospel itself), and *external grounds* (evidence from other early writers).



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The *internal* evidence for Johannine authorship was classically assembled by Westcott, who argued that there were indications within the gospel that the author was (a) a Jew, (b) a Jew of Palestine, (c) an eyewitness of what he describes, (d) an apostle and (e) the apostle John. While each of these points has been questioned at one time or another, Westcott's case has never been completely demolished.

The author's Jewishness appears beyond serious question from the multiple allusions to Jewish customs, topography and history scattered throughout the gospel. It is also reflected in the style of Jesus' teaching. This last point, touching the literary provenance of the gospel, is a fruit of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1947, which uncovered a parallel, first-century, Palestinian thought-world. The authentic Jewish orientation of the gospel is also indicated by the absence of echoes of the controversies which were current in the non-Jewish churches around the time the gospel was written.

The eyewitness aspect is explicitly claimed at several points in the text. It appears reflected in the many vivid touches throughout the gospel;⁷ the realistic character portrayals of people like the woman of Samaria in chapter 4, or the man born blind in chapter 9; the writer's intimate knowledge of the reactions of the disciples and of Jesus himself;⁹ and the details such as a knowledge of the names of characters who are anonymous in the parallel accounts in the synoptic gospels.

That the author is one of the twelve is indicated by his having been present in a place of some significance at the last supper (13:1ff., 23). Mark 14:17 indicates that only the twelve participated at that event.

The greatest controversy has gathered around the claim that 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', the author according to 21:24, is in fact John, son of Zebedee. The title appears only towards the end of the gospel. Some have even questioned whether this 'disciple' is a real person at all since, it is argued, no-one would claim such a title for themselves, nor would anyone readily call someone else by it. This last allegation appears somewhat gratuitous. We cannot at this remove from the events dogmatize about how people are perceived by others. While the title is certainly unusual it appears congruent with a fairly obvious desire for anonymity on the author's part. It may simply reflect his sense of wonder at the electing grace of God in his experience, or perhaps more plausibly be a nickname which arose from the individual's repeated reference to the amazing way Christ had loved him. An explicit equation of this disciple with John is not made within the gospel (though it is amply confirmed by external sources, as we will shortly observe). It is supported, however, by the otherwise astonishing omission of John, the son of Zebedee, from the gospel at any other point (except 21:2) when other 'lesser' disciple figures are quite regularly recognized. There is also the notably close association in this gospel of the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' with Peter,¹³ echoing the close association of John and Peter in Acts. We note too the maturity of reflection expressed in this gospel, along with the evidence of John having lived to a considerable age, and also the many parallels in thought and expression with the three letters of John in the New Testament, letters written by one who had 'seen with our eyes, ... looked at and our hands have touched ... concerning the Word of life' (1 Jn. 1:1). If the writer is not John the son of Zebedee, we are left asking who this disciple could have been who was clearly most closely associated with Jesus, attained such an intimate understanding of his heart and mind, composed this remarkable gospel, and yet disappeared from the scene without any trace beyond his enigmatic title, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.'

The *external* evidence for the authorship of John is extensive. As with the other New Testament books, there is a body of literary traditions dating from the early centuries which comments on the authorship. While they cannot be followed slavishly, their witness certainly needs to be weighed, since these witnesses are patently much closer to the original composition of the documents than any scholar can be today.

The first major witness is Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the latter part of the second century, who reports that John, the Lord's disciple, wrote the gospel and published it at Ephesus, and that he lived on until the time of the Emperor Trajan (AD 98). Eusebius reports that Irenaeus' authority for this information was the aged presbyter Polycarp, who had been a confidant of the apostles themselves, and had conversed with John in person. Irenaeus' testimony is the more impressive when we recall that he was in close contact with the major church in Rome during his ministry in Lyons, and hence that it is



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highly likely from the breadth of his contacts that Polycarp was not the only source of his conviction about the authorship of the gospel.

This view of the authorship of John was accepted without question by other major second-century figures like Tertullian, Clement and Origen, who was himself the author of a major early commentary on this gospel. *The Muratorian Canon*, published in Irenaeus' time, also attributes the gospel to John, adding that he wrote it following a vision given to Andrew.

The fact that the gospel attained fullest acceptance in the churches from the second century onwards is the more striking when one weighs the fact that it had two major problems associated with it. One was that the gospel was quoted and used polemically by the heretical Gnostic teachers during the first half of the second century. Claiming to impart a secret knowledge of God (Gk. *gnōsis*, knowledge) they used its high Christological statements to support their denials of the true humanity of Jesus. (What they failed to see, and what orthodox apologists were to point out to them, was that this very gospel is also a clear witness to Jesus' true humanity). The other difficulty with this gospel was its apparent distinctiveness of style and content when compared with the other three gospels. We will address that issue below, but it should not be imagined that this is a modern problem. The fact that despite these handicaps this gospel was afforded universal acceptance is simply inexplicable unless the original author was a distinguished figure of known apostolic credentials. Further, it is surely unthinkable that these early Christian leaders, many of them people of considerable culture and intelligence, could have embraced the Christian faith and faced the prospect of persecution, and even horrible martyrdom, without having enquired into the origins and authenticity of the documents upon which their faith rested.

In other words, it is difficult to believe that Luke was alone in his desire to have 'carefully investigated everything from the beginning, ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught' (Lk. 1:3–4). It is the more impressive accordingly that in such a context John's authorship of the fourth gospel appears to have been universally affirmed.

In the light of these facts it might be thought that to question John's authorship is 'a rather desperate expedient that stands against the force of the cumulative internal evidence and the substantial external evidence'. Scholarly opinion, however, is far from united on this issue. On internal grounds 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' continues to trouble interpreters, and externally much has been made of a citation by Eusebius, quoting Papias, another early sub-apostolic figure, which appears to distinguish between John the apostle and 'John the Elder'. This latter John, it is argued, was a disciple of John the apostle, and was the author of the gospel, but became confused with John the apostle to whom the gospel was mistakenly attributed. The Eusebius passage, however, is somewhat ambiguous as far as the alleged distinction between the two Johns is concerned, and there is no hint there of John the Elder, even if he existed, being the writer of the gospel.

Those wishing to pursue this issue should consult the major commentaries or introductions to the New Testament. Sufficient to say, the traditional view, that John the son of Zebedee was the author, certainly continues to be defensible. While no limits should be set to the activity of the sovereign Spirit of God, he commonly works through appropriate human vehicles, and it is reassuring to be able to affirm that in the composition of this great gospel he used one who stood in the closest historical relationship to the events described.

2. John and the synoptics

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament gospels indicates a difference in style and content between John's and the other three. These differences raise serious questions: are the gospels reliable accounts of what happened in the time of Jesus? More specifically, since on most points it is John who appears out of step with the others, is *his* gospel reliable?

Before identifying and commenting on the differences, it is helpful to first stake out the area of common ground between all four gospels. All four feature the witness of John the Baptist as the historical prelude to Jesus' ministry, the call and instruction of the disciples, the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus' voyage with his disciples on the sea of Galilee, Peter's confession of faith, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus' remarkable claims and his acts of power, the developing opposition and hostility of the

Jewish religious leaders, the cleansing of the temple, Jesus' final meal with his disciples, his arrest in Gethsemane, his trial, condemnation and crucifixion, his resurrection from the dead on the third day, his resurrection appearances and his commissioning of his disciples. In addition there are numerous specific sayings which are common or appear in parallel form in all four gospels. This is a not inconsiderable list.

The differences may be summarized under five headings:

a. Material which appears only in the other three gospels

Some of this covers incidents or teaching which occur in only one, or at most two, of the other gospels (*e.g.* the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son which are in Luke only; the raising of Jairus' daughter which is in Matthew and Mark only). So, despite their apparent appeal, John's omitting them is of no greater significance than their omission by one or more of the other evangelists.

More difficult to account for is John's omission of the transfiguration, the parables in their synoptic form, healings of demoniacs, the Lord's Supper, and the agony in Gethsemane, all of which appear in the three other gospels. The difficulty, however, is greatly reduced if John sees his task as complementing the other writers rather than as replacing them, or writing a full, comprehensive account of Jesus' ministry.

That John knew of the other gospels before writing his own is at least arguable. Scholars have claimed to find evidence in John's text of knowledge of Mark, and possibly Luke. If Luke was aware of 'many' other accounts when he came to write (Lk. 1:1), it is difficult to believe that John, writing as is generally believed some years after the others, could have been in total ignorance of the efforts of his fellow evangelists. The truth is that *each* evangelist is selective; John himself tells us that the available traditions about Jesus would exhaust any known library (20:30; 21:25). That 'Jesus did many other miraculous signs ... which are not recorded in this book' could be uttered as truly by Matthew, Mark and Luke as by John. Each evangelist chose from within the mass of available material those elements which would serve his own particular purpose in writing. John has already given ample stress to the revealing of Jesus' glory so that the transfiguration is not essential to his account, particularly as his presentation identifies the cross as the supreme moment of the glorification of the Son. John has his own selection of Jesus' parables and vivid figures of speech, though they are cast in a different style. His account of Jesus' healing ministry is *very* selective and happens not to include the curing of a demoniac (nor other categories of needy folk, such as deaf mutes or 'lepers'). His cataloguing of the work of the devil, however, is clear enough. The agony in Gethsemane is foreshadowed in 12:27–28; and the last supper is given rich and compatible context by the footwashing. Furthermore, if John was able to assume that at least one or two of the other gospels were already in circulation, his omissions are the more comprehensible.

b. Material which appears only in John

This encompasses large sections of John's earlier chapters, *e.g.* the wedding at Cana, and the conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. It also includes the raising of Lazarus, the discussions with the Jews, and the farewell discourses and foot-washing. A significant reason for the differences, however, arises from the fact that John concentrates almost entirely on the ministry of Jesus in and around Jerusalem during the temple feasts. The synoptic writers by contrast concentrate to a great extent on ministry in the north, around Galilee. We should bear in mind again the necessary selectivity of all four evangelists. If a 'gospel' is by definition an attempt to compile a biography, in our modern sense, of the entire life and teaching of Jesus, then not John alone, but all the evangelists fall short of the requirement. To assume this as the evangelists' aim is, however, at clear variance with their stated intentions. A 'gospel' is rather the telling of the story of Jesus in such a way that the unique significance of his person and work impacts the reader, enabling him or her to meet Jesus for themselves and be guided in following him. Patently we are not dealing here with the usual genre of literary biography.

At this point it is worth stressing the many points at which John complements the synoptic account by answering questions which the synoptics leave unanswered. To cite just two examples, why did the first disciples suddenly leave everything to follow Jesus? Perhaps it was the sheer impact of his person, but John gives us a clearer answer. They had already met Jesus (1:35–50), and so the decision to follow him was the culmination of a growing acquaintance. Or again, the citation from Jesus' teaching made by the

witnesses at his trial before the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:58), otherwise obscure in the synoptics, is recorded in John 2:19.

c. Difference in presentation

There are more extended discourses in John, and less straightforward narrative, than in the other gospels. More specifically, the Jesus we meet in the fourth gospel employs rabbinical methods of argument and regularly utters unvarnished theological principles. The synoptic Jesus is more anecdotal, and commonly employs a popular style in his preaching, using stories (parables) to make his theological points.

The difference, however, upon examination, is less significant than appears on the surface. The key is the difference of audience. As with all good teachers (and Jesus was arguably the greatest of teachers) the form was dictated by the hearers. The synoptic writers in their record of Jesus' teaching concentrate on his ministry in the north, in the Galilean region of his upbringing. John's primary focus, as we have already noted, was the more sophisticated, theologically aware milieu of Jerusalem. In addition, the methods and forms of the Johannine discourses have been shown to be congruent with those of synagogue teaching, which could involve dialogue with the audience, and the Scrolls at Qumran have uncovered a first-century thought-world in the southern Palestinian region which is wholly compatible. In our examination of these discourses we shall see again and again how perfectly they 'fit' with their claimed setting and with the attitudes and beliefs of the hearers. Besides which, Matthew includes a passage which would be entirely at home in the middle of any of Jesus' discourses in John (Matthew 11:25–30). John *does* have his equivalent to the parables, though the form is less of a story. Who would dare assert, however, that the same creative mind was not capable of both forms? If a C. S. Lewis was capable of producing sophisticated literary criticism, celebrated children's fiction, poetry, Christian apologetics, science fiction and autobiography, then we need to take the greatest care before dogmatizing about what the only one sinless and divine teacher in history is or is not capable of producing.

d. Differences in historical detail and chronology

There are four particular problems: the cleansing of the temple (John sets it at the beginning of the ministry, the synoptics set it at the end), the duration of the ministry, the date of the last supper and the disciples' understanding of Jesus.

On the first of these there is no inherent impossibility about there having been two such incidents during Jesus' ministry. As we shall note in the exposition, there are good psychological reasons for this action as the ministry was launched and also as it drew to its conclusion.

The issue of duration is not an acute one once it is recognized that the synoptic writers often leave chronology and duration fairly vague. John sets Jesus in relation to three Passovers and so requires a duration of two to three years. Nothing in the synoptics makes that impossible.

The question of different chronologies for the last supper arises because John in a number of texts appears to set the supper meal before the Passover began (*i.e.* on the Wednesday evening of Holy Week) with the crucifixion taking place the following day, the Thursday, coinciding with the slaughter of the Passover lambs in the temple. This is seen as a Johannine historical inaccuracy in order to make a valid theological point, *viz.* Jesus is the true Passover Lamb (just as he is the true Temple, the true Vine, *etc.*). That John sees Jesus as the fulfilment of the Passover sacrifices appears correct (*cf.* 19:36), but whether he alters the date of the crucifixion to make the point more forcibly is certainly not proved. The texts which are alleged to support a revision of date will be commented on below but in no case appear to 'prove' a contradiction. Another approach suggests that John and the synoptic writers may have been operating with different calendars.²⁰ Whatever the solution there do not appear conclusive grounds to set the evangelists in opposition.

e. The appreciation of the person of Jesus

This provides a final point of apparent contrast. In the synoptics the disciples' understanding grows slowly and comes to mature expression only after the resurrection, although there are important points of realization along the way, notably at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:16). In John the higher categories appear present much earlier (*cf.* 1:41, 49).



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Again the distinctions are more apparent than real. It is to be doubted that the disciples in John's gospel have any genuine appreciation of who Jesus is in the early period of their association with him. Their limited understanding is evident at numerous points; and indeed as late as the last supper they are apparently still confused about Jesus' relationship to the Father (*cf.* 14:9f.), the very heart of his teaching as John records it. Then, no less than today, the real test of understanding is not an ability to use theological ideas and titles but action based upon the truths professed. By that standard all four gospels speak with the same voice. In John, as clearly as in the synoptics, when the disciples' faith is put to the test in the Garden of Gethsemane they forsake Jesus and flee.

Thus the distinctions, even where real, need not diminish our appreciation of the historical trustworthiness of John's account. In the presence of the Word made flesh no single approach can ever be sufficient, nor any four for that matter. But God has purposed in his gracious providence the existence of the four gospels, each special and each important. Each is a witness to Jesus in a way which truly enables us to meet with Christ and set our lives under his leadership. Within that chosen team of witnesses John and his 'spiritual gospel' take an honoured place.

3. Purpose and date

A wide variety of purposes have been alleged for the gospel. These include the supplementing of the synoptic gospels, the correcting of the synoptic gospels, the combating of gnosticism, the combating of docetism (the early heretical view which denied the true humanity of Christ), the arraigning of unbelieving Jews, the opposing of the continuing followers of John the Baptist and the opposing of sacramentalism in the early church. In fact John tells us himself why he wrote: '... these 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). There appears no reason to disallow this statement. John writes to bring his readers to faith in Jesus Christ.

It needs to be added, however, that there is a possible alternative reading in the Greek for 'believe' in this verse. The reading followed in the NIV reflects an aorist tense expressing a decisive act of believing: 'that you may (come to) believe (Gk. *pisteusēte*)'. By this reading John's purpose is evangelistic; he writes to produce decisive commitment to Christ. The alternative reading is a present tense (Gk. *pisteuēte*), and would give a meaning like 'these are written so that those who believe may go on believing', *i.e.* may hold on to their faith and grow in it, a discipling purpose. On balance the textual support for the former appears stronger. Certainly there can be no doubt as to John's intention to confront his readers with the claims of Christ and to challenge them to respond. The proven evangelistic power of this gospel needs no documentation. While acknowledging this to be the *primary* purpose, however, it is not impossible to affirm a number of secondary aims as well. There can be little doubt that John is conscious of addressing Christians as well as non-Christians through his gospel, and hence of encouraging Christians to continue and grow in their faith. The 'upper room' discourses in particular are replete with teaching for the disciple of Christ. It is also likely that John is not unaware of the docetic tendencies in the Graeco-Roman culture within which he wrote, so the clear stress which John places on the true humanity of Jesus may well have had that heretical tendency in view. Above all, however, John is an evangelist in the classical sense; he writes to win lost people for Christ. At a time when world evangelization is again on the church's agenda John's presentation of his Master is truly a 'tract for the times'.

The precise dating of John is not easy to determine. Once it is seen to contain its own relatively independent witness to Jesus, the gospel could conceivably have been written at any point in John's maturer years. One striking event which must be weighed in dating all of the New Testament writings is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. This massive upheaval of Jewish life and thought is not reflected in any way in the gospel. This would probably imply a date either some years after, by which time the dust would have had time to settle from the calamity, or the period before. In 5:2 John refers to the Pool of Bethesda by 'there is', not 'there was'. While too much ought not to be placed on this, it equally should not be dismissed. If the Pool was still identifiable when John wrote we are looking at a date in the late 60s, certainly prior to AD 70. A date around this time might also explain John's



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relative lack of contact with the other gospels. The traditions which surround the composition of the gospel in the early church would appear to support a somewhat later dating, perhaps sometime in the early 80s, though of course within John's lifetime. Final certainty is not possible, but we have clearly travelled a long way from the days when John's gospel was cavalierly discounted as an authentic first-century witness to Jesus Christ and dated well into the second century.

4. John and Jesus

John is the most explicitly theological of the four gospels and contributes important insights on all the primary loci of Christian doctrine. The nature and attributes of God; humanity, fallen and redeemed; the person of Christ (see below); the work of Christ;²⁴ the person and work of the Holy Spirit; the church and its mission;²⁶ and the life of the new world. The reader is referred to the relevant sections of this book and to the major commentaries for detailed theological exposition.

The supreme doctrinal focus of this gospel is, however, the person of Christ (although never in separation from his work). As far as the deity of Christ is concerned, John affords possibly the clearest witness in the New Testament. The deity, however, is never separable from the true humanity of Christ.²⁹ He is simultaneously divine and human; not one at one point and the other at another point, but both together at every point.

When the church attempted to clarify its understanding of the person of Jesus Christ at Nicea in 325, and again at Chalcedon in 451, this gospel was of particular help in undergirding the confession of One who is both true God and true man. John makes no attempt to dilute the full reality of both the deity *and* humanity of Christ and so helped the church to confess Jesus Christ as one person in two natures. It is important to recognize that the framers of the early Creeds never imagined that they were providing an exhaustive explanation of who Christ was; that is a mystery forever beyond our grasp. What they saw themselves doing was simply (!) erecting, in the light of the witness of Scripture, certain boundary walls within which the person of the God-man was to be authentically encountered. Outside these limits lay heresy; within these limits lay truth.

Similarly, today, we are invited to approach reverently within the walls of the Word of God, to gaze wonderingly and adoringly upon the glory of the everlasting Son made flesh, and then go forth to live for him amid the realities of our everyday world. John's gospel helps us to do that. But who the Son is in himself remains a mystery beyond our comprehension.

It is this mystery which lies behind the revelation in this gospel, as in all the gospels. It is also the explanation of the effect of a study of John's gospel, for while by the end of it we sense we know Christ better, at the same moment we find ourselves having to acknowledge that he is even further beyond our grasp. This should not surprise us. If the ancient theological maxim is valid, *Deus comprehensus non est Deus* (a God who is comprehended fully is not God), then it is equally true to assert, *Christus comprehensus non est Deus* (a Christ who is comprehended fully is not divine).

The mystery of Jesus Christ is the theme of this gospel; always beyond us, yet always summoning us to explore it more fully. The exploration and service of the Godhead will be our endless, though blissful, task in the world to come; but we can begin it now, and there can be no better place to launch out into the depths of it than to study, and expound, this great gospel by John.

The Gospel of John

John's concern is to tell us about Jesus Christ; his book is a 'gospel', a proclamation of the good news (20:31). Arguably, he knows about several of the other gospels—he may well have studied Mark and has some acquaintance with Luke. John is probably aware therefore that the others have prefaced their accounts of Jesus' ministry by referring to his promised forerunner, John the Baptist. Matthew and Luke go still further back to the birth of Jesus,² and also provide genealogical tables linking Jesus to Abraham and Adam.⁴

John is especially conscious of the 'big picture'; Jesus' life and mission represent the critical central moment of all existence and all history, so he begins his account by setting Jesus against the widest possible horizon; he relates him to God and his eternal purposes, and to the entire life of the universe. 'The other gospels begin with Bethlehem; John begins with the bosom of the Father. Luke dates his



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narrative by Roman emperors and Jewish High Priests; John dates his “In the beginning”. Matthew and Luke take us to the cradle and the manger, Mark to the prophecies of old, but John takes us back into the mists of eternity.’

John attempts this specifically in his ‘prologue’ consisting of the first 18 verses. This opening paragraph achieves several things. It sets the scene for the events to be described later, introduces John the forerunner, and affords a ‘prevision’ of the gospel as a whole. Numerous commentators see it functioning rather as an overture to an opera. It tells of the deeds and significance of Jesus Christ up to the point of his entry upon the human story as a participant. In support of this way of understanding the prologue we can note that 1:1–18 is full of verbs rather than nouns and adjectives (there are no fewer than 44 verbs in the 18 verses); *i.e.* it is primarily about the *deeds* of Jesus rather than his nature or being. The prologue recounts the first part of his ‘ministry’. This may seem too prosaic a view of a passage which has at times been interpreted as ‘poetic’, but it does not restrict the soaring heights of truth in these verses. It does help ensure, however, that we are captivated by the person and activity of Christ himself rather than by any alleged artistry on the part of the evangelist.

Chapters 20 and 21 similarly give an account of the deeds and significance of Jesus Christ after the conclusion of his earthly ministry. This allows us to attempt a division of the gospel. In dividing the gospel for purposes of exposition a commitment to a particular perspective is necessary. Recognizing that no single category can even begin to encompass the breadth and richness of John’s portrait of Jesus, we take our cue from the dominance of the passion story in the gospel. In his presentation of the passion, John’s preferred category, as we shall see when examining the text, is that of kingship. Jesus is the ‘crucified king’—‘Here is your King!’ (19:14). One way of dividing the gospel is therefore as follows:

- A. The ministry of the pre-incarnate king (1:1–18)
- B. The ministry of the incarnate king (1:19–19:42)
- C. The ministry of the risen king (20:1–21:25)⁹

James and John the Sons of Zebedee

James and his brother **John** were among the first of the twelve apostles. Since they are always mentioned together until the death of James, it is reasonable to tell the story of both together. They lived in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee and were fishermen. They were the sons of **Zebedee** and were in partnership with Simon **Peter**.

Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee when he called Simon Peter and **Andrew** to follow him (according to John, he called Andrew, who then brought Simon Peter to him). Jesus then saw James and John in the boat with Zebedee, and he called them. They immediately left their father in the boat and went with Jesus (Matt. 4:18).

In Luke’s account, Simon Peter, James, and John were fishing and had caught nothing. Jesus, who already knew Simon Peter, asked him to put him out in his boat so that he could preach to the people. He then told the three of them to go out and drop their nets, and they were miraculously filled with fish to the breaking point. At this they accepted him as the Messiah, left their boats, and followed him (Luke 5:1–11).

Whenever the two brothers are mentioned by name, **James is always named first, denoting that he was the older**. They are also often referred to simply as the sons of Zebedee. This indicates that Zebedee was well known in the community. As they owned their own boats (a huge investment) and had servants, they were, by the standards of those days, very prosperous. On a surface reading it seems callous of James and John simply to walk out on their father and follow Jesus. However, if Zebedee were as prosperous as all the evidence indicates, he was by no means left alone and helpless. He had servants and possibly other partners and would not have been put in a financial bind by the absence of his sons.

⁹ Motyer, A., Stott, J., & Tidball, D. (1993). [General Preface](#). In *The message of John: here is your king!: with study guide* (pp. 1–30). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.



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The decision of James and John to follow Jesus was not as spur-of-the-moment as it appears on the surface. According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus knew Simon Peter fairly well already and thus would have known James, John, and Zebedee, Peter's business partners. **Before calling Simon he had healed Simon's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38ff.), and he had asked Simon to take him out in his boat to preach to the crowd.**

Also, there is evidence that Zebedee was Jesus' uncle, in which case Jesus had probably known them all since childhood. The evidence is somewhat round-about but nonetheless strong (although not all accept it). Matthew reports that "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons" were present at the crucifixion (Matt. 27:56); Mark reports that "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome" brought spices to embalm Jesus (Mark 16:1); and John says that "his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene" were at the foot of the cross (John 19:25).

If this third woman, variously identified as "the mother of Zebedee's sons," "Salome," and "his mother's sister," are all the same person, then Zebedee was married to Mary's sister Salome and was therefore Jesus' uncle; and thus James and John were his cousins. If that is the case, since they lived only about fifteen miles apart, they would undoubtedly have known each other all their lives. Jesus would also have known their friends Simon Peter and Andrew, again probably since childhood. This could have been the reason why Jesus chose to make Capernaum his home when he was rejected in Nazareth.

It must be noted, however, that many scholars reject this relationship on the basis that if they were indeed cousins the Bible would have made that clear, because such relationships were considered very important in those times.

James and John, along with Peter, were among the "inner circle" of the apostles. They were the only ones of the twelve whom Jesus allowed to join him at the raising of Jairus's daughter, and they were the only three whom he brought with him onto the Mount of Transfiguration. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took Peter, James, and John aside with him while he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. In spite of this, the faith of all three of them was weak, not reaching its acme of strength until after the Resurrection.

James and John were obviously men of strong personality, and they were also capable of being rash, speaking without thinking. Jesus called them *Boanerges*, an Aramaic word that, roughly translated (via the Greek Υἱοὶ Βροντῆς, *Huioi Brontēs*), means "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). When the Samaritans were rude to Jesus, James and John asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" Jesus, of course, rebuked them (Luke 9:54).

They also displayed their misunderstanding of his teaching when they approached him to ask that they might sit on his right and left in his kingdom. This was not so much rash as indicative of completely missing the point of Jesus' message. (For further commentary on that incident, see *Twelve Apostles, The*, especially the discussion of patronage in that article.) Jesus told them that they would share the same cup from which he must drink (referring, of course, to his suffering) (Mark 10:39). **In fulfillment of this prophecy, James was executed at the order of Herod Agrippa I, shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. This is the only martyrdom of an apostle that is recorded in the Bible.**

According to tradition, before his death James was a missionary to Spain, and he is the patron saint of that nation. Tradition says that after his martyrdom his body was carried back to Spain, where it is buried at Santiago de Compostela (*Santiago* being Spanish for "Saint James").

John survived James by several years as a prominent leader of the church. The book of Acts tells of his accompanying Peter on several missions, during one of which they healed a cripple (Acts 3). They also incurred the wrath of the leaders of the Jews (Acts 4:3ff.). John was also a member of the Council of Jerusalem that settled the Judaizing controversy (Gal. 2:9).

Traditionally John is accepted as the author of the Fourth Gospel and the three letters of John. Because of the similarity of literary style it is reasonably certain that all four documents were written by the same author, but their sophisticated style raises the question of whether a poorly educated fisherman is likely to have progressed to that literary level without intensive study.

John is also identified by tradition with "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23). Many dispute this on the grounds that John would not have described himself in such exalted terms; on the other hand, if he is not the author of the Gospel, then that argument vanishes. It is considerably less likely that he is the same as John the Divine, the author of the book of Revelation. This book is almost definitely written by a different author from that of the other four.



Who Are The Apostles? Week #3: Introducing John, The Evangelist

There is an ancient and quite reasonable tradition that John, into whose care Jesus gave Mary (John 19:25ff.), moved with her to Ephesus, where they both eventually died and were buried. A considerably less strong tradition says that John was martyred soon after his brother James.¹⁰

¹⁰ Losch, R. R. (2008). In *All the People in the Bible: An A-Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and Other Characters in Scripture* (pp. 185–186). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company.