

Introduction to the Gospel of John

John was the last of the gospels to be written and circulated. It was written at a time of 2nd and 3rd generation Christians who needed detailed instruction about Jesus to combat apostasy from within and opposition from without.

Doctrinal variations had started to appear (many eyewitnesses had died by this point). A new assertion of the basic Christian truths was required.

“He (John) did this because, after the other Evangelists had written their gospels, heresies had arisen concerning the divinity of Christ, to the effect that Christ was purely and simply a man, as Ebion and Cerinthus falsely thought. And so, John the Evangelist, who had drawn the truth about the divinity of the Word from the very fountainhead of the divine breast (13:23), wrote this Gospel at the request of the faithful. And in it he gives us the doctrine of the divinity of Christ and refutes all heresies.” Thomas Aquinas, *Prologus* 10 in *John* 1:26.

Authorship

The earliest tradition of the church ascribes authorship to John, son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' first disciples, and the one that was closest to him. This identification is confirmed by the following: Iranaeus (c.180), Theophilus of Antioch (165), Clement of Alexandria (220), Tertullian of Carthage (155-220), and Tatian (150) included it in his Diatessaron, (Harmony of the Gospels) somewhere between 160-175 AD.

Date

Suggestions have ranged from 45-150 AD. Most conservative scholars believe the most likely date is 85-90 AD. It's possible that it was written earlier and only circulated around that date. A dating of no later than 110 AD is considered the latest plausible date.

Purpose

- to meet the spiritual needs of a church that had little background in the Old Testament

In his own words:

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (20:31)

Key themes:

- Jesus was supernatural in his origin, powers and goal
- He was the Logos who had come into the world from another sphere

- He performed miracles or “signs” that illustrated his multi-faceted powers, especially applied to human need.
- He died and rose again to send his disciples out on a universal mission
- He will return

Theological Values

1. Jesus is no ordinary person. He is the incarnation of the eternal God.
2. Atonement. Jesus is the “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (1:29)
3. Eternal life. He bestows this gift on all who follow him.
4. The Holy Spirit: the person and functions of the Holy Spirit
5. The nature of belief. Belief is both the method and result of faith.

Relationship with the Synoptic Gospels (Syn’s)

- John parallels the others in general order
- his discourses are mainly apologetic and theological compared to those in the Syn’s which are mostly ethical and practical
- only seven miracles are recounted (only 2 duplicate those in the Syn’s)
- the chronological order is sometimes different (e.g. cleansing of the temple)
- it appears that John did not use the Syn’s as a source
- he wrote differently because he had a different purpose, more theological than biographical
- he records more of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples than to the crowds

John 1:1-18

The text divides quite neatly into four Strophes (stanzas):

Strophe 1

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning.

Strophe 2

³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ *There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

Strophe 3

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Strophe 4

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ *(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'")*

¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

¹⁷ *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and^[b] is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*

One reason why the gospel of John was symbolized in the ancient church by the eagle is the lofty heights attained by its prologue, which has been foundational to the classic Christian formulation of the doctrine of Christ.

In the medieval church the prologue was so venerated that it was sometimes worn as an amulet around the neck to ward off disease and evil spirits. The Roman church read it over the sick and newly baptized, and it was even the final prayer of the Roman mass.

The Prologue functions like an overture to an opera, introducing themes that will be developed later, e.g.

- The pre-existence of the Son of God (17:5)
- The giving of the only son in incarnation and death (3:16)
- His function as light of the world (8:12), and its life ((11:25)
- The manifestation of his glory (2:11)
- The unbelief of the world in the face of his glory (12:41; 16:8-11)
- The trust of those drawn by it (6:67-69; 12:31-2; 17:6-19)

Profound concepts are introduced: Word, life, light, glory, grace, truth, revelation – which are given their fullest significance in the story of the incarnate Logos that follows.

Strophe 1

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning.

One cannot miss the deliberate allusion to Genesis with “In the beginning...” This is a gospel that will record the re-creation of men and women, the giving of life in darkness where there is no hope. This parallels the thought of Gen 1, in which God breathes life into the nostrils of Adam and provides new possibilities for the world.

Logos

The semantic realm incorporates both Greek and Jewish thought:

Heraclitus: “the omnipresent wisdom by which all things are steered” – the divine word received by the prophet which is almost equivalent to God.

Stoics: a common law of nature, immanent in the universe, and maintaining its unity; the divine fire; the soul of the universe; the rational human soul.

Philo of Alexandria: agent of creation, medium of divine government in the world, the means by which men may know God.

Beyond these thoughts, John is inferring some personal identity between the Logos and God: And the Word *was* God (1:1). He uses the Greek word *eimi* (implying ongoing existence) rather than *ginomai* (coming into being). This can rightly be seen as the beginning of John's Trinitarian thought, with an emphasis on the pre-existence of Christ. Christ is not created or brought into being. He has the quality of ongoing existence, both prior and future.

We see this clearly in 8:58:

"Before Abraham was (*ginomai*), I am (*eimi*)."

Every instance of "was" in 1:1-2 is the word *eimi*.

There is a paradox of the Word who *was* God, and yet was in fellowship *with* God.

Strophe 2

³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶*There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

The italics above are meant to imply that this is like a footnote to the main argument, and not in the mainstream of thought.

The Logos is asserted to be the mediator of creation, not only in the act of creation but its continuance. The light and life include the light and life that comes to humankind in both creation and the new creation. The pre-existent Christ created everything. See Colossians 1:16-17:

¹⁶For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Note the perfect symmetry of thought between John and Paul. (Where were Ringo and George?)

The creative activity of the Logos is the activity of God through him.

The writer of Hebrews speaks of the Son through whom God made the universe (Heb 1:2); Revelation presents him as the arche (beginning, originator, ruler) of God's creation (Rev. 3:14).

Light and Life: both Wisdom and Torah are commonly associated with life and light in Jewish sources; John ties them in with Christ, the Word.

Light and darkness: in v5, there is an anticipation of the light/darkness duality that dominates much of the rest of the book. The darkness in John is not only absence of light, but positive evil (cf. 3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46; 1 Jn 1:5-6, 2:8, 9, 11). The light is not only revelation bound up with creation, but with salvation. The light of the Logos shone in the primal darkness at creation and continued amidst the darkness of fallen humankind; it shone with greater brilliance in the glory of the incarnate one.

The darkness has “not overcome it” or “not understood it” – the word can mean both, and has a double significance:

- To grasp with the mind and so to comprehend, or
- To grasp with the hand, and so to overcome or destroy.

Both ideas are present in John, but perhaps the second is the primary meaning here.

The Witness to the Word of God by John the Baptist

Even though JTB’s testimony was clear (6-9) Jesus still experiences rejection. John, the Gospel writer, does not need to identify John as the Baptist, because he never mentions the other John in Jesus’ circle, John the Son of Zebedee, the brother of James and close friend of Peter. The reason for this is the obvious one: he is the writer and only ever refers to himself obliquely.

The significance of JTB is that he was “sent from God” which puts him in the same category as Moses (Ex. 3:10-15) and the prophets (e.g. Isa. 6:8; Jer. 1:4ff). He came as a witness to testify to the light. The courtroom language of witness and testimony is common in the NT, but particularly in this gospel. Witness = *martyreo*, *martys*, *martyria* from which we get the English word “martyr.”

Strophe 3

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

John is not bearing witness to an abstraction or hope, but to a reality.

Kosmos = world is an important theological term for John, appearing 78x in the Gospel. Sometimes it is positive, sometimes neutral, but overwhelmingly the references are negative. The world is not the created order of things, but the sphere of creation that lives in rebellion (1:10; 7:7; 14:17, 22, 27, 30; 15:18-19; 16:8, 20, 33; 17:6, 9, 14, 25). When we read about Jesus' appearance in the world, or Jesus' salvation of the world, it is not an endorsement of the world, but a testimony to God's character and love.

But if the world is hostile, how can the light "enlighten" everyone? Is every heart illumined? Or does it refer to general revelation (nature etc.)?

The verb *photizo* has a primary meaning of: to light up, expose, bring to light. This is how the objective revelation of the Word works. The light invades the darkness, shining on every person and exposing them for who they are. It divides its audience: some flee because their deeds are evil (3:19-20) while some receive the revelation because their deeds are true (3:21).

Despite this, his own (the Jewish nation, his home) failed to recognize him (as the Messiah). Similar to the parable of the vineyard owner and the tenants, the residents repudiate his visit (Mark 12:1-12).

Thus, John makes a startling claim: Jesus has come for the entire world, not just the Jews. Those who did receive him obtained power to become God's children. There will be a powerful transformation of those who embrace this light instead of the darkness, who cling to the Messiah instead of the world.

Strophe 4

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (*John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"*)

¹⁶Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and^[b] is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

V14 **The Word became flesh...** this would be an astonishing concept for the Greek mind who separated the divine spirit and the mundane world (flesh, *sarx*). The second phrase, “made his dwelling among us” would have been stunning for the Jewish mind.

For that which He [i.e. Christ] has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole. (Athanasius)

God became human so that humans could become again, in reality, human. (Augustine)

¹⁷For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb 2:17-18)

¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)

The visual picture here is of an immense ‘V’ coming down and becoming a minute, measurable point, piercing our tiny time. In God’s incarnation, in the human Jesus of Nazareth, the Absolute became relative, the Almighty – a baby, the Ancient of Days – nowadays, the Divine – human, the Eternal – temporal, the Immortal – mortal, the Infinite – finite. The believing human race is deeply grateful for this Immense Descent. (Bruner)

The Word dwelt (*skenoo*) among us and revealed his glory (*doxa*). This verb for “dwelling” is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament (Septuagint) for the tabernacle of God. In other words, Christ is the locus of God’s dwelling with Israel, as He had dwelt with them in the tabernacle in the desert (Ex. 25:8-9; Zech. 2:10). **The glory of God which was once restricted to the tabernacle (Ex. 40:3) is now visible in Christ (14b).**

Grace. The word grace which is so common in the New Testament is relatively unused by John, except in this prologue (four times). Grace is found in God’s coming and working despite the hostility of the world. The recipients of grace are the ones who understand it better than any theologian who merely studies it.

Truth. This seems to be a more important concept for John. Truth is the self-disclosure that alone comes from God. Jesus can describe himself as “the truth” (14:6) and describe the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth (15:26; 16:13).

Jesus held grace and truth in perfect balance – what about us?
