

The Gospel of John

Lesson 1

Introduction

Anyone who reads the Gospel of John knows almost immediately that it is very different from the other three Gospels. It uses different metaphors, images, words, and stories to tell the story of the life of Jesus. It has a different beginning point (Jesus is at creation), a different chronology (Jesus goes to Jerusalem three times and not just once), a different view of when the Kingdom of God arrives (meaning the Kingdom has already arrived in Jesus), a different organization (two main sections with a prologue and an epilogue), and a different way of unpacking some of Jesus' sayings (rather than Jesus explaining the meaning, the author merges Jesus' words with the authors). What these differences mean is that we should approach the Gospel of John as it is, rather than trying to see it in terms of the other Gospels.

The author: tradition says that the author is John, son of Zebedee. There is no mention of this connection in the book itself. The only mention of what might be taken to be the author is "the disciple whom Jesus loved." It is this disciple who claims to have been a witness to all that is in the book. The connection to John began early in the life of the church but has been disputed because of a lack of any hard evidence. One theory is that the "beloved disciple" founded a particular community associated with the disciple John, and this community kept alive the stories and the theology of its founder (which we will cover in this study. The community then shaped the stories into the structure we now find. This authorship also connects the Gospel with the 3 letters of John. The Gospels and letter contain similar language and theology.

Dating: the earliest reference we have to John comes from a small fragment dated around 125 CE, which, by the way, is the oldest Biblical fragment we have. The language of John was used by early Christian writers beginning around 110 CE. It was first published alongside the other Gospels in 170 CE and the first commentary on it was written in about 180 CE. The speculation is that John was the last of the Gospels to be written, probably in the 80s or 90s CE.

Structure: the structure of John is that the Gospel begins with a prologue (1:1-18), the Book of Signs (1:19 – 12:50: all the stories in this section are focused on the word "sign), the Book of Glory (13:1-20:31: all the stories are on Jesus begin "glorified" through his trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.), and an epilogue (21:1-25).

Concepts: The **Word/Logos** refers to the preexistent living Word of God or Wisdom of God and confers on Jesus a divine status. **Sacraments** are not referred to in this Gospel (no baptism and no institution of communion in the upper room). **Individualism** comes to the fore, rather than the community. **Cross** is a means of glorifying Jesus and not a means of atonement. **John the Baptist** is not "the Baptist" but is a witness to Jesus as the one who takes away the sins of the world.

Purpose: I will make a claim through our study that the Gospel of John is written to give persecuted believers first an explanation as to why they are being persecuted (initially by the Jews and then later by others) and a confidence that because they believe in Jesus that they have been called and chosen by God for a new community, just as the Jews had been called by God for a previous community. What this means is that John is an anti-Jewish book. Even so, it is worth reading for its ability to understand more deeply who Jesus is.

Questions:

1. Does it make any difference to you that John may/may not have been the author? Why or why not?
2. What are your general impressions of John that you are bringing with you to this study?
3. Which of the "Concepts" if any are new to you? Which intrigues you the most?