



The Gospel of John

Context & Characteristics

The Gospel of John: Who?

- A 1st century Christian who claims to be an eyewitness
- Familiar with geography of Judea and Palestine
- Possibly (but not necessarily) the “beloved disciple” and/or John son of Zebedee
- Chapter 21 appears to have been written and added by another author later
- Many scholars now refer to a “Johannine school” or “Johannine community”

The Gospel of John: Where and When?

- Two key debates:
 - Within Christianity: What about the Gentiles?
 - Does becoming a Christian require conversion to Judaism?
 - Are Gentile Christians required to keep Torah?
 - Within Judaism: What about the Christians?
 - Are they another sect within Judaism?
 - Or are they something different entirely?



Titus Caesar Vespasianus



**Gaius Caesar Augustus
Germanicus**

The Gospel of John: Where and When?

- Two key debates:
 - Within Christianity: What about the Gentiles?
 - Within Judaism: What about the Christians?
- Two key events:
 - Destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 AD
 - Focus of Jewish religious life shifts to local synagogues
 - Separation of Christianity from the synagogues in the 80s and 90s
 - Loss of protection for monotheism
 - Unclear which side drove the separation

The Gospel of John: Where and When?

- Believed to be written after the separation
- Negative portrayal of *hoi Iudaioi*
- Strong theme of replacement of temple with Jesus

- Stylistically similar to some other Christian documents from Asia and Syria
- Typically dated to the early 90s

What and Why? A Unique Account

- Distinctly different material, point of view, and approach
- 90% of material unique to John
- What is shared is heavily reworked
- Long sections of teaching not found elsewhere
- Vivid, long stories
- Less emphasis on (or different?) sacraments
- Passion narrative even more dominant
- Strikingly different theology

What and Why? A “Spiritual Gospel”

- More reflective than descriptive
- Less concerned with events than with meaning
- MUCH higher Christology
- Revelation of divine character
- Resilience in the face of persecution

Major Themes: Already But Not Yet

- Eternal life begins now and flows into the future
- Those who believe in Jesus
 - Have life and have it abundantly
 - “will never die”
 - Experience the presence of Jesus
- However, this life is not yet completely fulfilled
 - Christ will “come and take you to myself”
 - There will be a resurrection on the last day
 - Jesus has gone but will return

Major Themes: Knowing the Truth

- Jesus is truth incarnate, the revelation of God
- Both messenger *and* message
- “full of grace and truth”
- “you shall know the truth”
- “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the life...”
- “I came into the world, to testify to the truth...”
 - “What is truth?”

Major Themes: Beloved Community

- Christian community explicitly different from
 - “the world”
 - *Hoi Iudaioi*
- Just as love is primary attribute of God, it is the primary marker of the community
- This love is about both attitude and action

Unique Features: The Prologue

- John begins with an early Christian hymn to the *Logos*, the Word
- The Word is eternally present and existent
- This Word became meat and lived among us
- Foundational for later doctrines of incarnation and of the two natures of Christ

Unique Features: The BD

- “Beloved disciple” or “disciple whom Jesus loved”
 - Mentioned 8x between chapter 13 and chapter 21
- Literary device, stand-in for all believers?
- Real person? If so, whom?
- Two possibilities:
 - John son of Zebedee
 - Lazarus

Unique Features: Symbolism

- Lamb of God
- “I am...”
- Light and Darkness
 - Nick at Night
- Blindness and sight

Unique Features: Misunderstanding

- Symbolism is often misunderstood
- Heavy use of irony, where characters misunderstand significance of own words
- Effect is to prompt reader to look for deeper meaning

Unique Features: Content and Style

- Differ significantly from Synoptics
- Content
 - Little or no discussion of reign of God, Torah, sacraments, repentance, or specific behaviors
 - Much more discussion of himself and what his coming means
- Style
 - More focus on long philosophical discussions
 - Big concepts rather than specific instructions

Unique Features: the Paraclete

- John emphasizes role of the Holy Spirit, or Advocate (Greek: *paracletos*)
- Spirit continues Jesus' work of teaching and revelation

Unique Features: Signs

- Miracles are referred to as *signs*
- Signs can lead people to faith
- People are encouraged to believe because of the signs
- However, those who believe *without* seeing are praised more highly

Unique Features: Crucifixion = Exaltation

- Passion predicted as “lifting up” (Greek: *hupsos*)
- Both literal and figurative meanings
- Jesus carries cross by himself
- Lays down life of his own accord and will take it up again
- “It is finished”, not “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Unique Features: *Hoi Iudaioi*

- “The Jews” depicted as adversaries throughout the Gospel
- Anachronistic, given that Jesus and all of his followers are also Jewish
- Modern translators are beginning to advocate use of “the Judeans” in order to minimize use of these texts to justify anti-Semitism
- Christian anti-Semitism is a heresy and must be categorically rejected

Unique Features: Love is All You Need

- Love is emphasized more heavily as the core ethic of the Christian community than in any other book
- However, there are no injunctions to love neighbors or enemies
- This love within the community apparently does not preclude hostility to outsiders

