

# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

## ORIENTING DATA FOR JOHN

- Content: the story of Jesus, Messiah and Son of God, told from the perspective of postresurrection insights; in his incarnation Jesus made God known and made his life available to all through the cross
- Author: the beloved disciple who “wrote [these things] down” (21:24; cf. 13:23; 19:25–27; 20:2; 21:7) most likely refers to John the apostle, son of Zebedee (otherwise not named in this Gospel); the “we” of 21:24 suggests another person is responsible for the Gospel in its final form
- Date: unknown; probably ca. A.D. 90–95
- Recipients: see 1 John, to which this Gospel is closely related
- Emphases: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; in his incarnation and the crucifixion, he both revealed God’s love and redeemed humanity; discipleship means to “remain in the vine” (Jesus) and to bear fruit (to love as he loved); the Holy Spirit will be given to his people to continue his work

## OVERVIEW OF JOHN

John’s Gospel is one of the great treasures of the Christian faith. Intentionally telling the story from a perspective after Jesus’ resurrection and the gift of the Spirit (see 2:22; 12:16; 14:26; 16:13–14), John writes to reassure believers of the truth of what they believe (in light of defections and rejection)—that through the Incarnation God is fully and finally known. Here is God’s love in full and open display.

In so doing, John puts the story of Jesus into the broadest biblical framework: The Incarnate One is none other than the Word, present with God from the beginning and responsible for creation (1:1–4, 10). But the Incarnate One is also the Crucified One, who, as God’s Lamb, “takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). John is also concerned to demonstrate that the incarnate Son of God is in fact the long-awaited Jewish Messiah; thus Jesus bursts onto the world’s stage, fulfilling every imaginable Jewish hope, while at the same time becoming “the Savior of the world” (4:42). Since he is the Son of (the living) God, what he gives is *life* (= the life of God himself)—eternal life (= the life of the coming age available now).

John begins with a prologue that puts much of this in poetic form (1:1–18), weaving theology and history together as he sets the stage for his telling of the story. The story itself is in two major parts (1:19–12:50; 13:1–20:31); it concludes with a commissioning epilogue and explanation of the (not-expected) death of the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:1–25).

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ca. *circa*, about, approximately

In part 1 Jesus first manifests himself as Son of God to his disciples (1:19–2:11), who thus see “his glory” (1:14) and “put their faith in him” (2:11). He is then revealed to “the world” (2:13–12:50) as both the Messiah and the Son of God. John brings this off by telling the story in the setting of the Jewish feasts, where Jesus acts and speaks in ways that fulfill the rich messianic expectations expressed (especially) through the ceremonies connected with these feasts (Passover, 2:13–4:54; Sabbath, 5:1–47; Passover, 6:1–71; Tabernacles, 7:1–10:21; Dedication, 10:22–42; [prelude to the final] Passover, 11:1–12:36). Also in this section one finds the seven “signs” (John’s *significant* word for miracles) and the seven “I am” sayings (Jesus’ self-identification). Part 1 ends with a double conclusion, narrating first Jesus’ rejection by some of the Jews (12:37–43) and then the meaning of Jesus and his mission (12:44–50).

The two narratives connected with the Passover (2:13–4:54; 6:1–71) also anticipate the final Passover narrated in part 2. Here the interest focuses first on the disciples as those who will carry on Jesus’ mission (chs. 13–17) and then on the crucifixion itself (chs. 18–19), where the Son of God cries (triumphantly) about his work, “It is finished” (19:30). The narrative proper concludes with the resurrection (ch. 20), focusing especially on the commissioning of the disciples (20:19–23) and using Thomas’s need to see as a foil for those who believe without seeing (vv. 24–31).

## SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING JOHN

The thing that should most strike you when coming to John’s Gospel from having read the Synoptics is how different it is. Not only is the basic scene of Jesus’ ministry different (Jerusalem instead of Galilee), but the whole ministry looks quite different. Here you find no messianic secret (Jesus is openly confessed as Messiah from the start); no parables (but rich use of symbolic language); no driving out of demons; no narratives of the testing in the desert, the Transfiguration, or the Lord’s Supper. Rather than placing emphasis on the kingdom of God, the emphasis is on Jesus himself (the Life who gives eternal life); rather than short, pithy, memorable sayings, the teaching comes most often in long discourses. As one scholar put it, “John seems to belong to a different world.”

The reason is that John deliberately sets out to tell Jesus’ story from the perspective of what he had come to know about him after the light had dawned (brought about by Jesus’ resurrection and the gift of the Spirit). Moreover, John’s interest in Jesus at his point in history (ca. A.D. 90–95) is shaped in particular by the false prophets who are denying the Incarnation and the saving significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and who are marked by a failure to love others (see “Specific Advice for Reading 1 John,” pp. 412–13). So part of the reason for his postresurrection perspective may be traced to this historical setting. You should note how often John emphasizes that Jesus is rooted deeply in flesh-and-blood history (he grows weary, thirsts, weeps at death; blood and water flow from his side while on the cross). The point is that the one whom John and his readers know as the exalted Son of God lived a truly human life on planet Earth and did so within the context of historical Judaism.

John’s special perspective accounts for two other phenomena peculiar to his telling of the story—(1) the nature of many of his narratives and (2) the use of double meanings of words,

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closely related to the rich symbolism. You need to be ready to hear some things at two levels. John often starts with a narrative, which then evolves into a discourse—and at times you cannot tell where Jesus stops talking and John himself is interpreting (this Gospel is especially problematic for red-letter Bible editions!). For example, in 3:1–21 he starts with a straightforward narrative of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, but at its heart are wordplays on the Greek word *anōthen* (which can mean either “again” or “from above,” which Nicodemus hears as “again” while John clearly intends both) and *pneuma* (the same word means “wind” and “Spirit”). And at verse 11 the “I/you [singular]” shifts to “we/you [plural]” and then moves into straight discourse, which from verses 15 to 21 comes in the language and style of 1 John. This has all the earmarks of Christian preaching, and it recurs throughout John’s Gospel.

John’s passion in this “preached” retelling of the story is threefold, two parts of which occur in his statement of purpose in 20:30–31. First, he cares especially to demonstrate that Jesus is deeply rooted in history as the Jewish Messiah, which is explicitly confessed by the disciples (1:41, 45; cf. 11:27) and confirmed by Jesus (4:25–26; 5:46; 10:24). Thus some of the “I am” sayings are full of Old Testament allusions—shepherd (Ezek 34), vine (Isa 5:1–7), bread (Exod 16:4; Ps 78:24)—where Jesus steps into the role of Israel itself (vine), as well as Israel’s kingly Messiah (shepherd). Most significantly, John sets the entire story in the context of Jesus’ being the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes associated with various aspects of the festival celebrations, matters often hidden to us but well known to him and his readers.

For example, at the Feast of Tabernacles there was a special water-pouring rite in the temple (described in the Talmud). This rite was related first to the giving of water from the rock in the desert (Exod 17:1–7); it came to be interpreted in a messianic way as pointing to the giving of the Spirit by the Messiah. It is on the “greatest day” of this feast that Jesus cries out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink,” which John then interprets in light of the gift of the Spirit (John 7:37–39). You are not necessarily expected to catch all of this as you read (a good commentary will guide you as to the details), but it is important to point out that there is often more than meets the eye in the reading of this Gospel. We will call your attention to some of this as you read along.

Second, John is concerned to demonstrate that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, is none other than the Son of God (the Jewish messianic title from Ps 2:7 now understood as the Second Person of the Trinity). In Jesus, God himself has become present by incarnation. John takes every opportunity he can to press this point over and over again (cf. 1 John).

These two matters lead to the third—the “pathos” of the Gospel, which is to be found in Jewish rejection of their Messiah, precisely because of his claims to divinity. This emerges first in the prologue (1:10–13) and becomes a subtheme throughout the whole Gospel, but especially in 2:13–12:50. This is not anti-Semitism, as is often claimed (any more than when Jewish prophets even more fiercely denounced their fellow Jews for failure to follow God); rather it is expressed out of a heart broken over the failure of the people to follow their Messiah. Those who were best positioned to understand Jesus rejected him because they were unwilling to risk letting go of their own safe categories. But whatever else, John clearly believes that Jesus died for the Jewish nation, as well as for the world (11:51–52).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 304–308.