

# Introduction to the Gospel of John

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## Author

Although the book does not name its author, he is indicated as the “beloved disciple” (John 21:20, 23-24) and a close companion of Peter. There are five men with the name of John that are mentioned in the New Testament:

1. John the Baptist (Jn. 1:6, 15, 19, 26, 29). He could not be the author of this book because he was beheaded by Herod long before the events mentioned in the Gospel of John were completed (Mk. 6:24-29).
2. John the father of Peter (1:42) is not mentioned in any connection which might suggest that he was the author.
3. John Mark (Acts 12:12). It has been concluded that he is the author of the second Gospel. The Gospel of John was written by an eyewitness, which eliminates John Mark as a possibility.
4. John of the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:5-6). The only reference in Scripture to this man presents him as an enemy of Christianity, and the presentation of John is anything but antagonistic to the cause of Christ.
5. John, the Beloved Apostle (Matt. 4:21; Jn. 21:20-25). Although disputed by many critics, he is the most likely candidate for authorship.



## Internal Evidence

There are several arguments within the book for John the apostle’s authorship:

1. Evidence suggests that the author was a Jew, because of his knowledge of current Jewish opinions such as Messianic expectations (1:21, 4:25, 6:14ff, 7:40ff, 12:34ff), attitude towards women (4:27), importance of religious schools (7:15), and hostility of Jews and Samaritans (4:9). He is also very familiar with Jewish observances and customs, such as the ceremonial pollution of entering a gentile court (18:28), customs at a marriage feast (2:1-10), and customs of burial (11:17-44). Finally, the vocabulary, the sentence structure, symmetry and numerical symbolism, expression and arrangement of thoughts are essentially Hebrew.
2. The author was almost certainly a Jew of Palestine, based upon his impressive local knowledge of the geography and topology of Jerusalem and the surrounding area (1:28, 3:23, 5:2, 9:7, 10:22, 11:18, 18:1, 19:13). The author also is not dependent on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used in Jesus’ day. Unlike other books in the New Testament, nowhere does a quotation of the Old Testament in John agree with the Septuagint translation over the Hebrew text.

3. Perhaps most importantly, the author of the book of John was an eyewitness of the events he describes. His descriptions of persons (Nicodemus – 3:1ff, 7:50, 19:39; Lazarus - 9:1ff, 12:1ff; Simon, father of Judas Iscariot – 6:71, 12:4, 13:2, 26) are extremely precise. He lists details of time, including specific mention of the hour at which events occurred (1:40, 4:6, 4:52, 19:14, 13:30). He also lists details of number and details of manner or circumstance (The boy had barley loaves—6:9; when Mary poured the ointment, the house was filled with the fragrance—12:3; the branches used at the triumphant entry were palm branches—12:13; Roman soldiers come with the officers of the priests to arrest Jesus—18:3; Jesus’ tunic was seamless—19:23; the facecloth in which Jesus was buried was wrapped and lying in a place by itself—20:7; Peter was grieved because the Lord said to him a third time, “Do you love me?”—21:17).
4. The author of the Gospel of John was an Apostle as evidenced by the following observations:
  - A. The scope of his descriptions of Jesus’ ministry from the call of the first disciple to the appearances after the resurrection.
  - B. He is acquainted with the thoughts and feelings of the disciples at critical moments: 2:11, 17, 22; 4:27, 6:19, 60 ff.; 12:16, 13:22, 28, 21:12.
  - C. He recalls words spoken among themselves: 4:33, 16:17, 20:25, 21:3, 5.
  - D. He is familiar with the places to which they withdrew for time alone: 11:54, 18:1-2, 20:19.
  - E. He is acquainted with imperfect or erroneous impressions they received initially: 11:13, 12:16, 13:28, 20:9, 21:4.
  - F. He stood very near the Lord:
    1. He knew the Lord’s emotions: 11:33, 13:21.
    2. He knew the grounds of the Lord’s actions: 2:24 ff, 4:1, 5:6, 6:15, 7:1, 16:19.
    3. He knew the mind of the Lord in many cases: 6:6, 6:61, 6:64, 13:1, 3; 13:11.
5. The author of the Fourth Gospel was *the Apostle John*.
  - A. John 21:24 assigns authorship to “the apostle whom Jesus loved.”
  - B. This disciple is mentioned by this title twice in the passion narrative (13:23, 19:26) and twice afterwards (21:7, 21:20).
  - C. He is known to the high-priest (18:15), an opportunity that John and his family may have had as a prominent family as well as possible supplier of fish to Jerusalem and the high priest.
  - D. He stands in close relationship with Peter (13:24, 20:2, 21:7).
  - E. From the list in 21:2 of those present, this disciple must have been one of the sons of Zebedee, *or* one of the two other unnamed disciples present.
  - F. The synoptic gospels present Peter, James and John as standing in a special relationship to Jesus. Peter is eliminated (20:21), James was martyred very early (Acts 12:2); *this leaves John*.

### External Evidence

The testimony of early church leaders was that John the Apostle was the author of the Gospel of John. Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130–200), an early church father wrote: “John, the disciple of the Lord, who leaned on his breast, also published the Gospel while living at Ephesus in Asia” (*Haer.* 3.1.1; quoted in Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 5.8.4.). Irenaeus also writes (in a letter to a friend, Florinus) of hearing Polycarp (d. 155) recount his interaction with “John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words, and what were the things concerning the Lord which he had heard from them,” and of which he took notes “not on paper but in my heart” (*Hist. Eccl.*

5.20.6–7; cf. 4.14.3–5). We have, then, in Irenaeus a man who claims to have traditions from John—whom Irenaeus assumes to be the apostle John, the son of Zebedee—mediated through Polycarp.<sup>1</sup>

## Date of authorship

Most scholars date the book between 65 AD and 100 AD. In 1934 a fragment of John 18 was found (titled p<sup>52</sup>), which has been dated at 125 AD. Since no one believes this fragment is actually part of the autograph (the original document), and since it came from Egypt, it is generally conceded that it would take several decades for the Gospel of John to be circulated, copied, carried to Egypt (and end up buried there). This requires a date for John's Gospel in the first century. Some argue for a date before 70 AD, since there is no mention of the destruction of Jerusalem. However, tradition holds that this was the last of the gospels written, and while he did not borrow from the synoptics, it does seem that he was knowledgeable of them, particularly Luke. Therefore, most scholars today believe that John wrote his gospel between 80-90 AD from Ephesus.

## Reason for Writing

John states his purpose for writing in 20:30-31 as confirming that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God and to convince others that by believing, they might have life in His Name.

## Prominent Themes

John is concerned to present the Deity of Jesus Christ. He recounts twelve confessions of those who knew Jesus, who proclaimed that he was the Messiah (1:34, 3:33-36; 1:41; 1:45; 1:49; 4:29; 4:42; 6:68-69; 9:36-38; 11:27; 16:30; 20:28; 21:7). He also presents seven “signs” that show Jesus to be the Son of God:

### Jesus' Seven “Signs” in the Gospel of John

1. Changing water into wine in Cana (2:1–11)
2. Healing an official's son in Capernaum (4:46–54)
3. Healing an invalid at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (5:1–18)
4. Feeding the 5,000 near the Sea of Galilee (6:5–14)
5. Walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee (6:16–21)
6. Healing a blind man in Jerusalem (9:1–7)
7. Raising dead Lazarus in Bethany (11:1–45)

He also lists seven “I Am” statements by Jesus

### Jesus' Seven “I Am's” in the Gospel of John

1. “I am the Bread of Life” (6:35).

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<sup>1</sup> Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 369.

2. "I am the Light of the world" (8:12).
3. "I am the Gate for the sheep" (10:7; cf. v. 9).
4. "I am the Good Shepherd" (10:11, 14).
5. "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (11:25).
6. "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" (14:6).
7. "I am the true Vine" (15:1; cf. v. 5).

*Belief* is also an important theme in John. He mentions the word "believe" 98 times. John wanted to stress an active, continuous, and vital trust in Jesus. This is evidenced by the fact that the verb "believe" is used most often in the present tense.

Finally, *Love* is very important in all of John's writings. In his Gospel, he uses the word "love" 56 times. It was important to John for his readers to know of God's incredible love for us (3:16) and that we should in turn love God and love one another (13:34-35; 15:12, 17).

### *Other Important Doctrinal Themes*

1. Jesus is God.	1:1–2, 18; 5:17–18; 8:58–59; 10:30–33; 20:28
2. Jesus existed before the creation of the world.	1:1–2; 8:58; 17:5, 24
3. Jesus has supernatural knowledge.	1:48; 2:4, 19, 23–25; 3:14; 4:17–18; 6:51, 70; 8:28; 9:3; 10:15, 17–18; 11:4, 14; 12:24, 32; 13:10–11, 38; 21:18–19
4. Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God.	1:36, 41, 49; 3:18; 4:25, 29; 5:25; 7:26, 27, 31, 41, 42; 9:22; 10:24, 36; 11:4, 27; 12:34; 19:7; 20:30–31
5. Jesus is the "I am."	4:26; 6:20, 35, 48, 51; 8:12, 18, 24, 28, 58; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 13:19; 14:6; 15:1; 18:5–6 (cf. Ex. 3:14–15; Isa. 41:4; 43:10–13, 25; 45:18; 51:12; 52:6)
6. Jesus, the sent Son, reflects the sender.	3:17, 35–36; 5:19–26; 6:40; 8:35–36; 14:13; 17:1
7. Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish festivals and institutions (including the temple).	1:29, 36; 2:14–22, esp. v. 21; 4:23–24; 8:12; 9:5; 19:14
8. Jesus is the giver of eternal life.	1:4; 3:15–16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 26, 39–40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47–48, 51, 53–54, 68; 8:12; 10:10, 25, 28; 11:25; 12:25, 50; 14:6; 17:2–3; 20:31

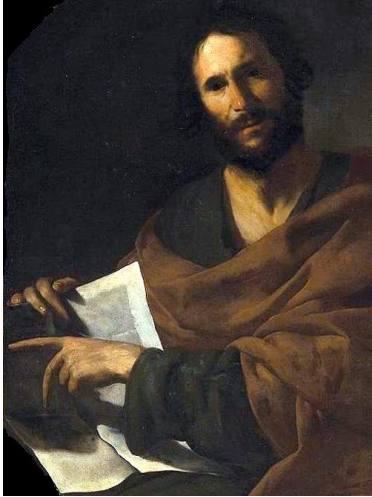
9. The signs of Jesus show that he is the Messiah (cf. also Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, above).	2:1–11, 13–22; 4:46–54; 5:1–15; 6:1–15; 9:1–41; 11:1–44
10. The witnesses to Jesus testify that he is the Messiah.	1:7–8, 15, 19, 32, 34; 3:11, 32–33; 4:39; 5:31–39; 8:14, 18; 10:25; 15:26–27; 18:37; 19:35; 21:24
11. Father, Son, and Spirit are united in their work of revelation and redemption.	14:17–18, 23, 26; 15:26; 20:21–22
12. Jesus' death is the basis of salvation.	1:29; 3:14–15; 6:51–58; 10:15; 11:50–52; 12:24; 15:13
13. God is sovereign in salvation.	3:21; 5:21; 6:37–45, 64–65; 10:16, 26–30; 15:16; 17:2, 6, 9
14. Salvation is obtained through believing in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God.	1:12; 3:15, 16; 5:24; 6:29, 35; 8:24; 11:25–27, 42; 12:44; 17:8, 21; 20:31
15. Believers can experience the benefits of salvation already in the here and now, during this present evil age.	3:18, 36; 4:23; 5:24; 6:39–40; 10:10, 26–29; 11:25–26
16. Believers are called to continue Jesus' mission (cf. also Jesus as the sent Son, above).	4:38; 15:16; 17:18; 20:21–22

## Distinctives of the Gospels

Gospel	Primary original audience	Theme
Matthew	Jews	Jesus is the King, the promised Redeemer Messiah
Mark	Romans	Jesus was a servant
Luke	Greeks	Jesus was a man like us, yet a Kinsman Redeemer
John	Universal audience	Jesus was the Son of God (deity)

## What do we know about John?

He was the son of a prominent fisherman named Zebedee (Mk. 1:20; Lk. 5:10). Providing fish for food was a lucrative business in his day, and the fishermen from Galilee supplied fish for the entire country except for the coastline. He also had a brother named James who left the fishing



business to follow Jesus at the same time as John. He was also a close associate of Simon Peter in the fishing business. John was perhaps the youngest of the disciples, possibly only 20 or 21 when he began to follow Jesus. He and his brother James were nicknamed the “sons of thunder” by Jesus, apparently for their fiery temperament (Mk 9:38-41; Lk 9:51-54). Yet despite his flaws, Jesus loved John and he became part of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples. Peter, James and John were the only witnesses of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:37), of the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1) and of the Agony in Gethsemane (Matt 26:37). Only he and Peter were sent into the city to make the preparation for the final Passover meal (the Last Supper –Lk 22:8). At the meal itself, his place was next to Jesus on whose chest he leaned. He describes himself as the "disciple whom Jesus loved."

John was also that "other disciple" who with Peter followed Jesus after the arrest into the palace of the high-priest (18:15). Yet, he was the only one who followed Jesus the entire way to the cross, and when Jesus was about to die, he looked down to John and committed the care of his mother to him (19:25-27). He was the first to the empty tomb upon learning of it, outrunning Peter. The book of Acts recounts his leadership of the church in Jerusalem during the early years after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 3:1, 4:3, Gal. 2:9). Tradition later tells us that after serving in Jerusalem for up to 12 years, the persecution of Herod Agrippa I led to the scattering of the Apostles through the various provinces of the Roman Empire (Acts 12:1-17) and John took up residence in Ephesus (in modern day Turkey).

According to Tertullian (in *The Prescription of Heretics*) John was sent into exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) after being plunged into boiling oil in Rome and surviving it. Some traditions hold that many in the Coliseum audience were converted to Christianity upon witnessing this miracle. This event would have occurred during the reign of Domitian, a Roman emperor who was known for his persecution of Christians in the late 1st century. After his exile, he returned to Ephesus. It is traditionally believed that John survived his contemporary apostles and lived to an extreme old age, dying naturally at Ephesus around 100AD. John's traditional tomb is thought to be located at Selçuk, a small town in the vicinity of Ephesus.



Traditional Grave of St. John at Ephesus

Resources for further study:

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