



Andrews Bible Commentary

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INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Title and Authorship: The title of the book, “The Gospel According to John,” is consistently found in the earliest Greek manuscripts, in the writings of the second- and third-century church fathers, and in the earliest translations. Although some variation of title exists, there is no evidence that this Gospel ever circulated without John’s name attached to it. This indicates that a title naming John as the author must have been attached to it as soon as it was written. According to Christian tradition, the “John” mentioned in the title of the Fourth Gospel has always been identified as the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee (see Mark 1:19–20; 3:17; 10:35) and the brother James (Acts 12:2). The identification, however, is not explicitly stated in the text of the Gospel itself. The Gospel says only that the author was “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20), indicating he was a well-known figure within the apostolic and post-apostolic church. He is presented as an eyewitness of the things he wrote, and his testimony was confirmed to be true by those who knew him (21:24).

Date & Backgrounds: Determining when the Fourth Gospel was written is difficult because there is little information from which a definitive conclusion can be drawn. The Gospel seems to suggest that John was already advanced in years when he wrote it. According to church tradition, John left Judea shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. He is said to have settled in Ephesus, where he ministered to the churches and eventually wrote his Gospel. Evidence that John wrote after the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70 seems to be implied in the way Jesus is presented in the Fourth Gospel as fulfilling some of the temple’s functions and as the one to whom the Jewish festivals connected to the temple pointed. Most scholars are, therefore, of the opinion that John was written between A.D. 80 and 100, the latter date being around the time of John’s death. Determining the specific situation that prompted John to write his Gospel is no less difficult than attempting to figure out when it was written. Broadly speaking, John’s Gospel was written to encourage faith in Jesus.

John and the Synoptics: John is different from the other Gospels in many respects. Though sharing the basic outline of Jesus’s ministry, as well as some sayings and incidents, the Gospel of John

emphasizes Jesus's ministry in Judea, not in Galilee, reports at least three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 11:55; cf. 5:1), instead of only one, and omits several important episodes of Jesus's life, including His birth, baptism, transfiguration, casting out of demons, and agony in Gethsemane. The Last Supper and the prophetic discourse (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) are also missing. Another difference is the portrait of Jesus Himself. Central emphases in John, such as Jesus's full divinity and preexistence, are virtually absent from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the miracles performed by Jesus are more extraordinary than those reported by the other Evangelists. In the Gospel of John, the Evangelist does not record Jesus's parables or short sayings but instead emphasizes His long and thoughtful discourses. John also constantly uses words that are scarcely used in the other gospels (e.g., love, truth, know, world, abide, judge, send witness), and he records Jesus speaking of Himself metaphorically as the Bread of Heaven, the True Vine, the Good Shepherd, the Door, and the Light of the World.

How do we account for such differences? On one hand, there is no question that Jesus was too great of a teacher to limit Himself to only one teaching style or vocabulary. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that John offers more theological insights than do the Synoptics. This is why, comparatively speaking, John has much less biographical material than the other Gospels—roughly, 40 percent less than Mark, 50 percent less than Matthew, and 60 percent less than Luke—despite being much longer than Mark, and almost as long as Matthew and Luke. John does contain biographical information but follows a stricter chronological framework in his account. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–14) he both remembers and retells the gospel episodes that were more congenial to the situation in which he found himself at the time of his writing.

Theology: Although all four Gospels are theological, in John's Gospel theology plays a more central role than the others, so much so that the Synoptics could be defined as theological biographies. John is perhaps best viewed as biographical theology—his Gospel is a masterpiece of early Christian theology. Behind its simplicity of language and style, there lies a profound, well-crafted, and stimulating theological presentation of Jesus and His ministry that has proven to be vital for the Christian understanding of the person and work of Jesus.

Some of the main theological emphases include the following: (1) Jesus Christ; (2) Holy Spirit; (3) Eternal Life; (4) Sabbath; (5) Sanctuary; (6) God's People; (7) Two Worlds; (8) Last Events; and (9) Hope.



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