

## Thru the Bible: The Gospel of John: Introduction

Lindisfarne Gospels

**Authorship:** Who wrote the Gospel of John – the Apostle, son of Zebedee (and brother of James), who was one of the Twelve, or another John? Or, to put it another way, what is the identity of the “beloved disciple”? In the closing editorial verses of the Gospel, it is this “beloved disciple” who is stated to be the witness and author of the events of the Gospel: *“This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.”* **John 21:24.** Other passages that mention the ‘beloved disciple’ are **13:23-24; 18:15-16?; 19:26-27; 20:2-8; 21:7, 20, 23-24.**



Gospel of John Folio

**1. Traditional Authorship:** *John the Apostle*, the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus’ original twelve disciples. In early church tradition, this became the most common attribution *after* the second century A.D., and is a commonly held view among laypeople and churches today. It is one that seems to be naturally suggested by the first mention of the “beloved disciple” reclining next to Jesus at the Last Supper in John 13:23-24, and the impression in the other gospels that Jesus ate the Passover meal with the “twelve” (Matt. 26:17-20; Mark 14:12-17). Some of the earliest external evidence comes from Irenaeus and Jerome:

- “Since, therefore, the tradition from the apostles does thus exist in the Church, and is permanent among us, let us revert to the Scriptural proof furnished by those apostles who did also write the Gospel, in which they recorded the doctrine regarding God, pointing out that our Lord Jesus Christ is the truth, and that no lie is in Him.” [cf. **Jn. 14:6; 1 Jn. 2:21, 27**] **Against Heresies, 3.5.1**
- “John, the apostle whom Jesus loved, the son of Zebedee and brother of James the apostle...was the last one to write a gospel, at the request of the bishops of Asia.” **Jerome, Vir. ill. 9**

**2. Alternate Identification:** *John the Elder*, a Jerusalem disciple who hosted Jesus when he traveled to the city from Galilee. Since it is generally accepted that the same author wrote the Gospel and the three Letters of John towards the end of the NT, it is interesting that the author of the letters refers to himself as “the Elder” [*presbuteros*], not the apostle, in the salutation of 2 and 3 John 1:1: “The *elder* to the...”

a. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis sometime during the reign of Trajan (98-117 A.D.) is the earliest church father to mention the presence of two Johns in the region of Asia, “If ever anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or **John** or Matthew, or any other of the Lord’s disciples had said, and what Aristion and the **presbyter John**, the Lord’s **disciples**, were saying. For I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice.” (**Eusebius, H. E. 3.39.4**)

b. This is possibly the same John who is mentioned as related to the high priestly family in Acts 4:6, when the apostles Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin: “The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, **John**, Alexander and the other men of the high priest’s family.” Note that in John 18, “the other disciple, who was known to the high priest [Annas and Caiaphas mentioned in the previous verses], came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in.” **John 18:15-16**

**Date of composition:** Up until the 1930’s many scholars regarded the Gospel of John as a very late work, written around the middle of the second century A.D. This obviously would have implications for the issues of authorship and authority, and would put the book in the same category as the many apocryphal gospels which appeared around the same time. With the discovery of a fragment of the gospel from the Egyptian sands, all that was changed. Papyrus 52 is the oldest NT manuscript ever discovered, dated around 100-115 A.D., and contains portions of John 18:31-34 (*recto*) and 37-38 (*verso*). While John is still considered the latest of the four gospels, it is now generally dated to somewhere around 90 A.D.



**Place of composition:** The Gospel of John is traditionally connected with the church and city of Ephesus in Asia. The early church writer Irenaeus, as quoted in the church historian Eusebius, comments on the origin of the first three Gospels and then says, “Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who had even rested on his breast, himself gave forth the gospel, while he was living in Ephesus in Asia.” (**H. E. 5.8.4**). If you travel to Ephesus, you can visit the ruins of the Basilica of St. John, built in the middle of the sixth century A.D. by the Emperor Justinian (picture of the baptistery at right). You can watch an introductory video on Ephesus and the Basilica from Dave Stotts’ *Drive Thru History* at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1kuRBMLDIU>



**Original Audience and Occasion:** As the last gospel written, John reflects the growing tension between Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah and those who don't, and the gradual separation between Judaism and Christianity, which is traditionally called "the parting of the ways." John's gospel refers to "the Jews" 63 times, often in the context of debates and conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish leadership, particularly the Pharisees and Chief Priests. Against this backdrop, John, the author of the gospel stands as a *witness* to the true identity of Jesus, and gives the most specific purpose statement of any gospel, "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing in him you may have life in his name." (Jn. 20:31)

"The Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be *put out of the synagogue*" **John 9:22**  
Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees, they did not confess it, for fear that they would be *put out of the synagogue*" **John 12:42**

"I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will *put you out of the synagogues*. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God" **John 16:1-2**

"And for the apostates let there be no hope; and may the insolent kingdom be quickly uprooted, in our days. And may the *Nazarenes* [Notzerim] and the *heretics* [minim] perish quickly; and may they be erased from the Book of Life; and may they not be inscribed with the righteous. Blessed art thou Lord, who humblest the insolent."

**Prayer 12 of the Shemoneh Esreh**

**Relationship to the Synoptic Gospels:** Whereas there is an interdependent relationship between the three Synoptic Gospels, only about 10% of the Gospel of John parallels the traditions and teachings found in the earlier three gospels. There are no genealogies or birth narratives; no baptism or temptation of Jesus or transfiguration; no institution of the Lord's Supper. Other significant differences include:

- **Geographical Setting:** Most of the events of the gospel take place in or near Jerusalem as opposed to Galilee.
- **Chronology:** The traditional view of the duration of Jesus' ministry as about three years comes only from the events and evidence of John's Gospel. Everything that occurs in the Synoptic Gospels could easily fit into one year or less.
- **Miracles of Jesus:** no exorcisms and very few healings, and five of John's eight miracles are unique to his gospel.
- **Messianic Titles:** no *Son of Man* or *Son of David*; rather, John has a strong emphasis on Jesus as the *Son*, and God as *Father* (130x versus 4x in Mark).
- **Teaching of Jesus:** no clear use of parables and only one occasion where the *Kingdom of God* is mentioned. Instead, John has long discourses of Jesus, often with unique themes of contrast: light versus darkness; truth versus falsehood; life versus death; love versus hate; belief versus unbelief; above versus below; etc.
- **Gospel Characters:** no Sadducees or Scribes [cf. 8:3]; no encounters with tax collectors, lepers or the demon-possessed. As for disciples, the word *apostle* does not appear, and only six of the twelve disciples are mentioned by name (though the 'sons of Zebedee' are mentioned in 21:2), with a special focus on apostles and other disciples not accented in the Synoptic Gospels, like, Philip, Thomas and Nathaniel (not one of the 12).

"The four [living creatures] had the face of a **man**, the face of a **lion**... the face of an **ox**... the face of an **eagle**"  
**Ezek. 1:10**



**Structure of the Book:** Like all four gospels, John has an intentional structure and thematic arrangement, organized around special traditions and concerns of the writer, and their relevance to the situation of hearers/readers living in his day. The gospel is traditionally seen as being composed of four distinct parts:

**Prologue: John 1:1-18** John's testimony about the Word who became flesh

**Book of Signs: John 1:19-12:50** John's testimony to seven significant sign acts of Jesus

**Book of Glory: John 13:1-20:31** John's testimony to the central events and teaching of Jesus' final week

**Epilogue: John 21** John's testimony concerning the destiny of Peter and himself

"The populace [in Antioch] seems to have noticed that converts to Christianity did not become ordinary Jews – and they were always speaking of their founder as *Christos*, "the anointed one." So the Antiochenes put the somewhat derogatory label *Christianoi*, "the Christ-sect," on these Gentile Converts. It was several years later that the Gentile believers began to apply this designation to themselves; the Jewish believers never adopted it, nor were they called Christians by their adversaries among the Jews. In Acts 24:5 Paul is called 'a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.' ...[and] 'Nazarenes' later became a common designation of Jewish believers."

**O. Skarsaune, In the Shadow of the Temple, 176**