

Introduction to John

From the very beginning, the Gospel of John has a different tone and feel than the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The fourth gospel begins with a hymn of praise for the Word of God made flesh (1:1-18) and a cosmic “birth” story. While the first three gospels share similar stories and events in Jesus’ ministry, John’s gospel portrays an altogether different Jesus as the incarnate God, the “I AM.” The author recounts familiar episodes in Jesus’ ministry, such as the temple incident and the time of Jesus’ death, but with some chronological shifts.

As with the other gospels, the authorship of John is unknown. Early traditions credit John the son of Zebedee (mentioned in all four gospels) as its author. The unnamed disciple “whom Jesus loved” (13:23; 19:26; 21:20-24) has also been identified with John. Clues in the gospel had led scholars to believe that John was written for members of a Jewish community who were followers of Jesus, but current research suggests John was written for anyone who wanted to know more about Jesus.

John’s gospel is made up of two large sections after the prologue (1:1-18). Frequently called the “Book of Signs,” the first of the large sections (1:19—12:50) narrates Jesus’ public ministry, in which he performs seven miracles, or “signs,” over the course of a three-year ministry. The second section (chapters 13–21) describes Jesus’ last meal with the disciples and his arrest, crucifixion, and post-resurrection appearances. This last half of the story, sometimes referred to as the “Book of Glory,” includes Jesus’ last words to his disciples, typically called the “Farewell Discourse” (chapters 14–17).

An early church father, Clement of Alexandria, described the Gospel of John as a “spiritual account” of Jesus’ life and teachings. Often considered more theological than historical, the portrait of Jesus in the Gospel of John is very distinctive from that in the other gospels. John includes stories about Jesus that do not appear in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, among them his first sign at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11), his encounter with Nicodemus (3:1-21), the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (4:1-42), the woman caught in adultery (7:53—8:11), the raising of Lazarus (11:1-44), and the post-resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene (20:11-18) and Thomas (20:24-29). Also unique to John’s gospel are the various “I AM” statements of Jesus.

The first words of the gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1), make it clear that the fourth gospel is not concerned with Jesus’ family tree but with his identity as the Word of God, who is from God and is God, made flesh. Jesus is portrayed as being one with the Father and in absolute control and aware of his purpose. The central claim of this gospel is that Jesus is the revelation of God’s love for the world (3:16). Jesus is the one who makes God known. Through Jesus we, as God’s children, are invited into the same intimate relationship with God that Jesus has with the Father (1:18). The prologue introduces the gospel’s main themes: light and darkness, belief, truth, abundant life, and witness. For the Gospel of John, Jesus is not the suffering Messiah but the very presence of the divine “I AM” (see Exodus 3:14), who has chosen to come into the world.

The writer also makes it clear that the gospel was written for a specific purpose: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31). Readers are invited into an encounter with Jesus that leads to abiding in the Word (8:31-32). We receive the same promises as Jesus’ first disciples: abundant life and union with Jesus and God. The gospel continues to call Jesus’ followers to witness to the presence of the Word in the world so that the whole world will experience God’s love.