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John

Scripture: John

Code: MSB43

Title

The title of the fourth gospel continues the pattern of the other gospels, being identified originally as “According to John.” Like the others, “The Gospel” was added later.

Author and Date

Although the author’s name does not appear in the gospel, early church tradition strongly and consistently identified him as the Apostle John. The early church father Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 130–200) was a disciple of Polycarp (ca. A.D. 70–160), who was a disciple of the Apostle John, and he testified on Polycarp’s authority that John wrote the gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia Minor when he was advanced in age (*Against Heresies* 2.22.5; 3.1.1). Subsequent to Irenaeus, all the church fathers assumed John to be the gospel’s author. Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 150–215) wrote that John, aware of the facts set forth in the other gospels and being moved by the Holy Spirit, composed a “spiritual gospel” (see Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.7).

Reinforcing early church tradition are significant internal characteristics of the gospel. While the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) identify the Apostle John by name approximately 20 times (including parallels), he is not directly mentioned by name in the Gospel of John. Instead, the author prefers to identify himself as the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). The absence of any mention of John’s name directly is remarkable when one considers the important part played by other named disciples in this gospel. Yet, the recurring designation of himself as the disciple “whom Jesus loved,” a deliberate avoidance by John of his personal name, reflects his humility and celebrates his relation to his Lord Jesus. No mention of his name was necessary since his original readers clearly understood that he was the gospel’s author. Also, through a process of elimination based primarily on analyzing the material in chaps. 20, 21, this disciple “whom Jesus loved” narrows down to the Apostle John (e.g., 21:24; cf. 21:2). Since the gospel’s author is exacting in mentioning the names of other characters in the book, if the author had been someone other than John the apostle, he would not have omitted John’s name.

The gospel’s anonymity strongly reinforces the arguments favoring John’s authorship, for only someone of his well known and preeminent authority as an apostle would be able to write a gospel that differed so markedly in form and substance from the other gospels and have it receive

unanimous acceptance in the early church. In contrast, apocryphal gospels produced from the mid-second century onward were falsely ascribed to apostles or other famous persons closely associated with Jesus, yet universally rejected by the church.

John and James, his older brother (Acts 12:2), were known as “the sons of Zebedee” (Matt. 10:2–4), and Jesus gave them the name “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). John was an apostle (Luke 6:12–16) and one of the 3 most intimate associates of Jesus (along with Peter and James—cf. Matt. 17:1; 26:37), being an eyewitness to and participant in Jesus’ earthly ministry (1 John 1:1–4). After Christ’s ascension, John became a “pillar” in the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:9). He ministered with Peter (Acts 3:1; 4:13; 8:14) until he went to Ephesus (tradition says before the destruction of Jerusalem), from where he wrote this gospel and from where the Romans exiled him to Patmos (Rev. 1:9). Besides the gospel that bears his name, John also authored 1–3 John and the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1:1).

Because the writings of some church fathers indicate that John was actively writing in his old age and that he was already aware of the synoptic gospels, many date the gospel sometime after their composition, but prior to John’s writing of 1–3 John or Revelation. John wrote his gospel ca. A.D. 80–90, about 50 years after he witnessed Jesus’ earthly ministry.

Background and Setting

Strategic to John’s background and setting is the fact that according to tradition John was aware of the synoptic gospels. Apparently, he wrote his gospel in order to make a unique contribution to the record of the Lord’s life (“a spiritual gospel”) and, in part, to be supplementary as well as complementary to Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The gospel’s unique characteristics reinforce this purpose: First, John supplied a large amount of unique material not recorded in the other gospels. Second, he often supplied information that helps the understanding of the events in the synoptics. For example, while the synoptics begin with Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, they imply that Jesus had a ministry prior to that (e.g., Matt. 4:12; Mark 1:14). John supplies the answer with information on Jesus’ prior ministry in Judea (chap. 3) and Samaria (chap. 4). In Mark 6:45, after the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus compelled his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida. John recorded the reason. The people were about to make Jesus king because of His miraculous multiplying of food, and He was avoiding their ill-motivated efforts (6:26). Third, John is the most theological of the gospels, containing, for example, a heavily theological prologue (1:1–18), larger amounts of didactic and discourse material in proportion to narrative (e.g., 3:13–17), and the largest amount of teaching on the Holy Spirit (e.g., 14:16, 17, 26; 16:7–14). Although John was aware of the synoptics and fashioned his gospel with them in mind, he did not depend upon them for information. Rather, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he utilized his own memory as an eyewitness in composing the gospel (1:14; 19:35; 21:24).

John's gospel is the only one of the 4 that contains a precise statement regarding the author's purpose (20:30, 31). He declares, "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:31). The primary purposes, therefore, are two-fold: evangelistic and apologetic. Reinforcing the evangelistic purpose is the fact that the word "believe" occurs approximately 100 times in the gospel (the synoptics use the term less than half as much). John composed his gospel to provide reasons for saving faith in his readers and, as a result, to assure them that they would receive the divine gift of eternal life (1:12).

The apologetic purpose is closely related to the evangelistic purpose. John wrote to convince his readers of Jesus' true identity as the incarnate God-Man whose divine and human natures were perfectly united into one person who was the prophesied Christ ("Messiah") and Savior of the world (e.g., 1:41; 3:16; 4:25, 26; 8:58). He organized his whole gospel around 8 "signs" or proofs that reinforce Jesus' true identity leading to faith. The first half of his work centers around 7 miraculous signs selected to reveal Christ's person and engender belief: 1) water made into wine (2:1–11); 2) the healing of the royal official's son (4:46–54); 3) the healing of the lame man (5:1–18); 4) the feeding of multitude (6:1–15); 5) walking on water (6:16–21); 6) healing of the blind man (9:1–41); and 7) the raising of Lazarus (11:1–57). The eighth sign is the miraculous catch of fish (21:6–11) after Jesus' resurrection.

Historical and Theological Themes

In accordance with John's evangelistic and apologetic purposes, the overall message of the gospel is found in 20:31: "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." The book, therefore, centers on the person and work of Christ. Three predominant words ("signs," "believe," and "life") in 20:30, 31 receive constant reemphasis throughout the gospel to enforce the theme of salvation in Him, which is first set forth in the prologue (1:1–18; cf. 1 John 1:1–4) and reexpressed throughout the gospel in varying ways (e.g., 6:35, 48; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11–14; 11:25; 14:6; 17:3). In addition, John provides the record of how men responded to Jesus Christ and the salvation that He offered. Summing up, the gospel focuses on: 1) Jesus as the Word, the Messiah, and Son of God; 2) who brings the gift of salvation to mankind; 3) who either accept or reject the offer.

John also presents certain contrastive sub-themes that reinforce his main theme. He uses dualism (life and death, light and darkness, love and hate, from above and from below) to convey vital information about the person and work of Christ and the need to believe in Him (e.g., 1:4, 5, 12, 13; 3:16–21; 12:44–46; 15:17–20).

There are also 7 emphatic "I AM" statements which identify Jesus as God and Messiah (6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5).

Interpretive Challenges

Because John composed his record in a clear and simple style, one might tend to underestimate the depth of this gospel. Since John's gospel is a "spiritual" gospel (see Authorship and Date), the truths he conveys are profound. The reader must prayerfully and meticulously explore the book, in order to discover the vast richness of the spiritual treasures that the apostle, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (14:26; 16:13), has lovingly deposited in his gospel.

The chronological reckoning between John's gospel and the synoptics presents a challenge, especially in relation to the time of the Last Supper (13:2). While the synoptics portray the disciples and the Lord at the Last Supper as eating the Passover meal on Thursday evening (Nisan 14) and Jesus being crucified on Friday, John's gospel states that the Jews did not enter into the Praetorium "lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover" (18:28). So, the disciples had eaten the Passover on Thursday evening, but the Jews had not. In fact, John (19:14) states that Jesus' trial and crucifixion were on the day of Preparation for the Passover and not after the eating of the Passover, so that with the trial and crucifixion on Friday Christ was actually sacrificed at the same time the Passover lambs were being slain (19:14). The question is, "Why did the disciples eat the Passover meal on Thursday?"

The answer lies in a difference among the Jews in the way they reckoned the beginning and ending of days. From Josephus, the Mishna, and other ancient Jewish sources we learn that the Jews in northern Palestine calculated days from sunrise to sunrise. That area included the region of Galilee, where Jesus and all the disciples, except Judas, had grown up. Apparently most, if not all, of the Pharisees used that system of reckoning. But Jews in the southern part, which centered in Jerusalem, calculated days from sunset to sunset. Because all the priests necessarily lived in or near Jerusalem, as did most of the Sadducees, those groups followed the southern scheme.

That variation doubtlessly caused confusion at times, but it also had some practical benefits. During Passover time, for instance, it allowed for the feast to be celebrated legitimately on two adjoining days, thereby permitting the temple sacrifices to be made over a total period of four hours rather than two. That separation of days may also have had the effect of reducing both regional and religious clashes between the two groups.

On that basis the seeming contradictions in the gospel accounts are easily explained. Being Galileans, Jesus and the disciples considered Passover day to have started at sunrise on Thursday and to end at sunrise on Friday. The Jewish leaders who arrested and tried Jesus, being mostly priests and Sadducees, considered Passover day to begin at sunset on Thursday and end at sunset on Friday. By that variation, predetermined by God's sovereign provision, Jesus could thereby legitimately celebrate the last Passover meal with His disciples and yet still be sacrificed on Passover

day.

Once again one can see how God sovereignly and marvelously provides for the precise fulfillment of His redemptive plan. Jesus was anything but a victim of men's wicked schemes, much less of blind circumstance. Every word He spoke and every action He took were divinely directed and secured. Even the words and actions by others against Him were divinely controlled. See, e.g., 11:49–52; 19:11.

Outline

I. The Incarnation of the Son of God (1:1–18)

A. His Eternality (1:1, 2)

B. His Pre-incarnate Work (1:3–5)

C. His Forerunner (1:6–8)

D. His Rejection (1:9–11)

E. His Reception (1:12, 13)

F. His Deity (1:14–18)

II. The Presentation of the Son of God (1:19–4:54)

A. Presentation by John the Baptist (1:19–34)

1. To the religious leaders (1:19–28)

2. At Christ's baptism (1:29–34)

B. Presentation to John's Disciples (1:35–51)

1. Andrew and Peter (1:35–42)

2. Philip and Nathanael (1:43–51)

C. Presentation in Galilee (2:1–12)

1. First sign: water to wine (2:1–10)

2. Disciples believe (2:11, 12)

D. Presentation in Judea (2:13–3:36)

1. Cleansing the temple (2:13–25)

2. Teaching Nicodemus (3:1–21)

3. Preaching by John the Baptist (3:22–36)

E. Presentation in Samaria (4:1–42)

1. Witness to the Samaritan woman (4:1–26)

2. Witness to the disciples (4:27–38)

3. Witness to the Samaritans (4:39–42)

F. Presentation in Galilee (4:43–54)

1. Reception by the Galileans (4:43–45)

2. Second sign: healing the nobleman's son (4:46–54)

III. The Opposition to the Son of God (5:1–12:50)

A. Opposition at the Feast in Jerusalem (5:1–47)

1. Third sign: healing the paralytic (5:1–9)

2. Rejection by the Jews (5:10–47)

B. Opposition During Passover (6:1–71)

1. Fourth sign: feeding the 5,000 (6:1–14)

2. Fifth sign: walking on water (6:15–21)

3. Bread of Life discourse (6:22–71)

C. Opposition at the Feast of Tabernacles (7:1–10:21)

D. Opposition at the Feast of Dedication (10:22–42)

E. Opposition at Bethany (11:1–12:11)

1. Seventh sign: raising of Lazarus (11:1–44)

2. Pharisees plot to kill Christ (11:45–57)

3. Mary anointing Christ (12:1–11)

F. Opposition in Jerusalem (12:12–50)

1. The triumphal entry (12:12–22)

2. The discourse on faith and rejection (12:23–50)

IV. The Preparation of the Disciples by the Son of God (13:1–17:26)

A. In the Upper Room (13:1–14:31)

1. Washing feet (13:1–20)

2. Announcing the betrayal (13:21–30)

3. Discourse on Christ's departure (13:31–14:31)

B. On the Way to the Garden (15:1–17:26)

1. Instructing the disciples (15:1–16:33)

2. Interceding with the Father (17:1–26)

V. The Execution of the Son of God (18:1–19:37)

A. The Rejection of Christ (18:1–19:16)

1. His arrest (18:1–11)

2. His trials (18:12–19:16)

B. The Crucifixion of Christ (19:17–37)

VI. The Resurrection of the Son of God (19:38–21:23)

A. The Burial of Christ (19:38–42)

B. The Resurrection of Christ (20:1–10)

C. The Appearances of Christ (20:11–21:23)

1. To Mary Magdalene (20:11–18)

2. To the disciples without Thomas (20:19–25)

3. To the disciples with Thomas (20:26–29)

4. Statement of purpose for the Gospel (20:30, 31)

5. To the disciples (21:1–14)

6. To Peter (21:15–23)

VII. Conclusion (21:24, 25)

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