

# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART I

## INTRODUCTION

I. Although the Gospel contains no direct statement of authorship, the Church tradition has been almost universal in attributing the Gospel to John the Apostle. This view does not preclude, however, some of his assistants helping him and organizing the material.

A. The early witnesses of the Church, such as St. Justin the Martyr (a prominent Christian philosopher and writer of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century), St. Irenaeus (bishop of Lyons and a friend of St. Polycarp, a disciple of John) and the Muratorian Canon (the list of most of the books of the New Testament written by a Roman congregation in the late second century) all agree that the Gospel was written by John the Apostle. Eusebius, the court historian of Constantine, refers also to the affirmation by St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215) that John the Apostle wrote the Gospel. See Ecclesiastical History Book VI ch. 14, sec. 5-7.

B. The Gospel itself says that it is based upon the testimony of "the beloved disciple," who definitely seems to be John the Apostle. See John 21:20.

1. The Gospel does not refer by name to the apostle John and, unlike the other Gospels, calls John the Baptist simply "John," for the Gospel does not name any other person John. The idea is that, rather than use his own name, the evangelist refers to himself as "the beloved disciple."

2. "The beloved disciple" was clearly among the Apostles, and someone particularly close to Jesus, even among the Apostles, see, e.g., John 13:23, 21:7. He is the one who can most easily ask Jesus who His betrayer will be and he is the first among the Apostles to understand why the tomb was empty and to recognize Jesus in Galilee. See John 13:23, 20:8, 21:7. Peter, James and John were the three Apostles who were closest to Jesus. They were with Jesus during some particularly profound experiences (e.g., the raising of Jarius' daughter, the Transfiguration, and the Agony in The Garden) that even the other Apostles did not witness. See Matt. 17:1, 26:36; Mark 5:37. The beloved disciple could not be Peter because he is described several times interacting with the beloved disciple. James would be martyred in Jerusalem around the year 44, much too early for the Gospel to be written. Thus, John is the only likely candidate.

3. John likely referred to himself as "the beloved disciple" because he wanted to write in the third person, but considered it

clumsy to refer to himself by name. A similar device is frequently used by St. Theresa of Avila in The Interior Castle and The Way of Perfection, and likely at one point by St. Paul. See 2 Cor. 12:2. The term likely indicated the closeness to Jesus. Peter had the greater authority but John understood Jesus more, as Peter himself seemed to know. In addition, by referring to himself as "the beloved disciple," John gives himself a description that any Christian can share in. Not everyone would be called to the authority of Peter or the preaching of John the Baptist. But the love and consequent insight of John makes him a more obvious model.

## II. Who was John?

A. John the Apostle seems to have been the youngest of the apostles and was, as a teenager, called by Jesus. See Matt. 4:21-22; Mark 1:19

B. James and his brother John were fishermen and sons of Zebedee. They lived near the Sea of Galilee and worked closely with Peter and his brother Andrew before any of them were called by Christ. See Luke 5:1-11. By all accounts, he and his brother James wasted no time in responding to Jesus' call. Assuming, as most have believed, that he was "the other disciple" referred to in John 1:35-39, he was already a disciple of John the Baptist and had spoken with Jesus before Jesus called him to leave his father and profession and become a full time disciple.

C. He and James were called Boanerges, or the sons of thunder, for their strong and impulsive natures. See Mark 3:17. Among other things, when a Samaritan town would not welcome Jesus and His disciples, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume it. See Luke 9:54. They and their mother were also impulsive in asking Jesus to sit at His right and left in the new kingdom, and in immediately saying that they would be able to "drink of the cup" that Jesus drank of, a concept that they probably ill understood. See Mark 10:35-45.

D. On the other hand, John although he fled at first when Jesus was arrested, came back and was near Jesus at the trial and at the Cross. See John 18:16, 19:25-27. For an unexplained reason, John was an acquaintance of the high priest Annas; it is possible that, due to his devotion, the high priest had taken a particular interest in him. It is likely because he was better connected in Jerusalem that Jesus sent him with Peter to prepare the upper room See Luke 22:8.

E. At the Cross, Jesus entrusted Mary to him and he took her into his home until she was assumed into heaven. He also

recognized Jesus first when He appeared to the disciples on the shore of Galilee and Jesus indicated that He had a special mission for John. See John 21:7, 20-22.

E. Even before the Ascension of Jesus, John and Peter seemed to be teamed together. See, e.g., Luke 22:8, John 20:3-9. When the Church was first beginning in Jerusalem, Peter and John often appeared together. See Acts 3:1-10, 4:13-22, 8:14-16. He was still clearly one of the principal leaders of the Church at the time of the Council of Jerusalem around 50 A.D.. See Gal 2:9. Noteworthy, however, he does not so much act with power or teaching authority at critical moments. He seems to be the visionary who peers more deeply into the meaning of things.

F. Church tradition, such as that of St. Irenaus and Polycrates (the bishop of Ephesus, who died about the year 190) says that John went to Asia Minor and there lived at Ephesus. See Irenaeus, Against Heresies Book II, chapter 22, section 5; Book III, chapter 1, section 1; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History Book III, chapter 31 sections 1-4. There is a house at Ephesus that he is traditionally said to have lived in, as well as his burial site. (Shortly after the Council of Jerusalem, St. Peter went to Rome and rule the Church from there.) He may have resided in Jerusalem and/or elsewhere first.

G. As his life was progressing, it appears that the Docetist and Gnostic heresies, which denied Jesus's true humanity, was arising; and the letters of John indicate his strong opposition to them. See, e.g., 1 John 4, 22; 2 John 7.

- It would appear that the author of the letters of John, who identifies himself simply as "the presbyter" was John the Apostle, for the style is very similar and there is no other likely candidate. Eusebius does argue that the presbyter was a different person, although still a disciple of John. See Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History Book III ch. 29. Even under this view, the letters of John would reflect controversies that the apostle John dealt with.
- The letters of John reflect a desire for harmony among Christians and a compassion for human weakness, combined with the old fire in opposing heresy. Compare 1 John 1:8-2:2, 4:7-21, 2 John 5 with 1 John 2:18-23, 2 John 7-11.
- These letters also reflect a world that was increasingly (and unsuccessfully) hostile to Christians, see 1 John 3:1-18.

H. Tradition says that in 95 A.D., the 14<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Emperor Domitian, Domitian sent John into exile on Patmos, an almost uninhabited land, apparently because John was opposing payment of the former Temple tax, which was now used to

support a pagan monuments. See Rev. 1:9-10; St. Irenaeus Against Heresies Book V, chapter 30 section 3; Eusebius Ecclesiastical History Book III chapter 18 verses 1-3. (The Jewish temple had been destroyed in 70 A.D. and the Emperor tried to keep the tax going, but now for pagan monuments, a double insult to the Jews and by extension the Christians.) It is likely that the charge was one of opposing taxes, rather than of opposing directly the pagan religion, because the latter offense was generally punished by death. After Domitian was assassinated in 96 A.D., the Emperor Nerva apparently allowed John to return to Ephesus.

I. John apparently died about 100-110 A.D., by far the longest lived of the Apostles and the only one not to be martyred.. St. Irenaeus says that he died in the seventh year of the reign of the Emperor Trajan, around 105. Irenaeus, Against Heresies Book II ch. 22, sec. 5.

III. The Gospel of John was apparently finished late in John's life, around the year 100. However, the references to the Jewish feasts, which ended with the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. may well indicate that the Gospel was begun shortly before or after that time. Given that the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) seem to make no use of this Gospel, it is likely that it was published after them. That is the general view of almost all commentators, old and new. See, e.g., Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History Book VI, chapter 14, verses 5-7; Fr. Raymond Brown, The Gospel and Epistles of John 11-12. The fact that it refers generically to "the Jews" and not specifically to the specific groups, e.g., Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Zealots, indicates that it was likely finished well after the destruction of the Temple, for that event largely led to the end of most of those groups.

IV. The Gospel according to John is symbolized by the eagle largely because, from the prologue onwards, it soars to the divine perspective.

A. This Gospel emphasizes very much the divinity of Christ, and the fact that He is in command.

1. Right from the beginning, it says "The Word was with God and the Word was God." John 1:1.

2. Jesus over and over again says, "I am," reflecting the name God for Himself that revealed to Moses. See Ex. 3:13-14; John 8:24, 28, 58; 18:5-8.

B. This Gospel presents Jesus' suffering in the positive light of His command over even death and the means by which He is "lifted up" to save all of humanity.

1. Jesus described even His crucifixion as Him being "lifted up" and "glorified." See John 3:14-15, 8:28-30, 12:27-28, 17:1-5.

2. Even when under arrest, Jesus was in command of the situation. The soldiers and even Pilate were afraid of Him. See John 18:6-11, 19:8-12. On the Cross, Jesus continued to carry out His ministry, entrusting Mary and John to each other and then commanding "It is finished" before "hand[ing] over His spirit." John 19:2-30.

C. There is also a heavy use of the elements (light and darkness, water, wind and the earth) to show forth God's providence and the consequences of rejecting it. E.g., John 1:3-5, 3:19-21, 8:12-20, 9:1-41 (dealing with light and darkness); John 4:1-26; 7:37-19:28, 34 (water); John 3:8, 20:22 (wind); John 1:50, 2:1-11, 6:1-14, 22-59 10:7-10 (fruits of the earth.) These elements reflect the creation account in Genesis and show how Jesus is restoring and exalting creation. There is also a strong theme of sharing in adoptive sonship and sharing in eternal life. See 1:12-13; 3:16-21; 5:24-29; 6:60-69; 20:30-31.

D. The Gospel describes fewer events and does so at greater length, using double and triple meanings. For example, John several times uses word play on a Jewish term that could be two things. See, e.g., John 3:8 (wind and spirit, from the common term *ruah*); John 7:8 (going up, which could refer to travel or to being raised on the Cross); John 13:1 ("to the end" could mean until death or to the greatest degree.) Even the high priest Caiaphas unknowingly spoke at two levels and prophesied about the importance of Jesus' death, "it is better that one man should die instead of the people." John 11:50. There are more lengthy discourse than in any other Gospel and most of the events, especially the miracles, include explanations regarding the theme of the event. See, e.g., John 5:17-47; 6:22-68, 9. When Jesus speaks at a depth, the people do not at first understand, but later come to do so. See, e.g., 1:48-51; 2:19-25, 3:3-15, 4:7-25.

VI. The Gospel begins with the Prologue (John 1:1-19), continues onto the Book of Signs (John 1:19-13:50, describing the miracles and discourses of Jesus), reaches a climax with the Book of Glory (describing the Last Supper and the passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus), and concludes with an epilogue regarding the sending forth of the disciples from Galilee.

A. Looked at in this way, there is a parallel between the progressions of the Mass (Introductory Rite, Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist, and Dismissal Rite) and this Gospel.

B. The Book of Signs is structured along the lines of seven "signs" or miracles Jesus performs, generally with related discourses, and along the lines of Jewish Feasts (especially Passover, but also the feast of Tabernacles, Hanukkah, and likely Pentecost.)

The miracles show the power of Jesus and the restoration of the primordial order, in terms such as the restoration of the fruitfulness of the earth, healings, calming the waters, and raising the dead. The references to the feasts show how Jesus is bringing to fullness the promises the feasts celebrated.

C. The Book of Glory describes the Last Supper and the passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. The Last Supper discourses, chapters 14-17, are the longest continuous speech in the New Testament. The other evangelists describe the institution of the Eucharist directly and describe the rest of the Last Supper briefly. St. John has no direct description of the institution of the Eucharist (instead using the Bread of Life Discourse in chapter 6 to speak of the Eucharist), but instead records Jesus' final instructions, prayers, and promises regarding the unity and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The account of the arrest and condemnation of Jesus shows

Him very much in command and describe Him as a king, but not of this world. See John 18:28-38, 19:14-15, 19-22. The resurrection accounts show the Apostles and Mary Magdalene gradually coming to understand Jesus at last.

D. The Epilogue, which may have been added after the first text was drafted, shows Jesus' restoration of creation through the miraculous catch, which also likely symbolizes the Church. It goes on to the commissioning of Peter and a hint at the special mystical role of John the Apostle. The Gospel then concludes with an affirmation of the reliability of the narratives just presented and a sense of wonder at a mystery beyond anything that could be written.