

THE SON OF GOD IN THE BOOK OF JOHN



Bread From Heaven. Good Shepherd. Passover Lamb

Table Of Contents

Title	1
Author and Date	1
Background and Setting	2
Major Structural Components	3
Major Themes	4
Conclusion	8

Title

The title of the fourth gospel continues the pattern of the other gospels, being identified originally as “According to John.”

Author and Date

Although the author’s name does not appear in the gospel, early church tradition strongly and consistently identifies the Apostle John as the author. 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 synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) and being moved by the Holy Spirit, composed a “spiritual gospel” (not implying that the other gospels are unspiritual, but that John is more overtly interested in the theological underpinnings of Jesus’ person and work than the synoptics).

Reinforcing early church tradition are significant internal characteristics of the gospel. While the synoptic gospels 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 unanimously accepted 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, along with his older brother James (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 (and after the Temple’s destruction in A.D. 70).

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 four 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). Also it's composed to equip believers to proclaim the message of Jesus the Messiah among their unbelieving audiences.

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.

He probably wrote his gospel primarily to Diaspora Jews (the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel) and to Gentiles attracted to the Jewish faith, but ultimately to the church at large. The destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70 left a gaping void in Jewish life, especially in Palestine, but also in the diaspora. Judaism without a temple meant Judaism without a fully operational sacrificial system, including the priesthood.

The question of what would now become of Judaism was in everyone's mind. John's answer is clear: he hopes to encourage diaspora Jews and proselytes to turn to Jesus, the Messiah who fulfilled the symbolism embodied in the temple and the Jewish festivals. For John, the temple's destruction thus becomes an opportunity for Jewish evangelism. He invites his countrymen to take another look at Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, the Son of God. This, of course, would have been true to Paul's motto: "first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Rom 1:16; Acts 1:8; 28:23-28). John presents Jesus as filling the void left by the loss of the Jewish central sanctuary.

Major Structural Components

The introduction (commonly referred to as the prologue) sets John's entire gospel into the framework of the eternal, pre-existent Word-become-flesh in Jesus (1:1-18). The first half of John's narrative portrays Jesus as Messiah by selecting seven representative signs:

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)
7. The raising of Lazarus (11:1–57)

John also marshals Jesus' seven "I am" sayings:

1. I am the bread of life (6:35, 48, 51)
2. I am the light of the world (8:12; 9:5)
3. I am the door of the sheep (10:7, 9)
4. I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14)
5. I am the resurrection and the life (11:25)
6. I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6)
7. I am the vine (15:1, 5)

As well as several (possibly seven) witnesses:

1. John the Baptizer (1:7-8, 15, 32, 34; 3:32; 5:33)
2. The Samaritan woman (4:39)
3. Moses (1:45; 5:45-47; cf. 9:18-28)
4. The Father (5:37; 8:16)
5. Jesus himself, including his own works (3:11; 5:36; 8:14, 18; 10:25, 32, 37-38; 13:21; 18:37)
6. The Spirit and the disciples (15:26-27)
7. The Fourth Evangelist, John (19:35; 21:24)

According to John, all these witnesses support the notion that Jesus is in fact the Messiah and Son of God. In the Synoptics, it is Jesus who is on trial. John reverses this pattern: it is actually the world that is on trial, and all the above characters are on the witness stand, testifying to Jesus' messianic identity while convicting the world (including "the Jews") of its guilt of sin and unbelief.

But what kind of Messiah is Jesus? John skillfully interweaves three portraits that complement one another:

1. Jesus is the one who came into the world and returned to the place from which he came (descent-ascent): this aspect of John's Christology focuses on the otherworldly origin and divinity of Jesus.
2. Jesus is the sent Son: here the emphasis lies on the closeness and uniqueness of relationship sustained by Jesus and God the Father.
3. Jesus is the eschatological (end-time) shepherd-teacher: the Old Testament (e.g., Ezek. 34) predicted that Yahweh (one of the names for God in the Old Testament) would visit, care for, and teach his people; in fact, he would send his servant David (the Son of David) to accomplish this mission; as it turns out, this eschatological shepherd-teacher is Jesus.

In developing his presentation of Jesus' messianic identity, John traces people's (esp. The Jewish people's) response to Jesus' claims by featuring characters in his gospel asking representative questions

or confessing Jesus as Messiah. This device serves the purpose of leading the readers of John's gospel to arrive at the conclusion stated in 20:31: "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." Thus in 1:41, Andrew tells Peter: "We have found the Messiah." In 4:29, the Samaritan woman tells her countrymen: "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah? In 7:26 and 31, the crowd at the feast queries, "Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah?...When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man?" In 10:24, the Jews confront Jesus: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." And in 11:27, Martha confesses, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

Overall, while the first portion of John's gospel (chaps. 1-12) portrays the earthly Jesus' (failed) mission to the Jews (see Isa. 6:10; Rom. 10-11), the second part (chaps. 13-21) presents the exalted Jesus' mission with and through his new messianic community. The Farewell Discourse (chaps. 13-17) tells of the cleansing (foot washing and Judas' departure; chap. 13) and preparation of the messianic community (instructions concerning the coming Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, and his ministry to the disciples; chaps 14-16) as well as Jesus' final prayer on behalf of his own (chap. 17). John's Passion Narrative (chaps. 18-19) shows Jesus' death as both providing atonement for sin (cf. 1:29, 36; 6:48-58; 10:15, 17-18), though largely drained of notions of shame and humiliation (contrast the Synoptics), and as a station on Jesus' return to the Father (e.g., 13:1; 16:28).

The account of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus is followed by the narration of his resurrection appearances and commission of his disciples (chap. 20). Jesus, the Sent One par excellence (9:7), is now the one who sends his new messianic community (20:21-23). The disciples are to depend on Jesus and obey him the way he depended on and obeyed the Father during his earthly mission. The disciples are taken into the life of the Godhead, which is characterized by perfect love and unity (chaps. 14-17), and are appointed partners in the proclamation of salvation and forgiveness in Christ (15:15-16; 20:21-23). The purpose statement in 20:30-31 reiterates the major motifs of the entire narrative: the "signs," believing, (eternal) life, and Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.

The concluding chapter portrays the relationship between Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved" in terms of differing yet equally valid roles of service within the community of believers.

Major Themes

1. GOD

God is known in John's gospel primarily in two ways: as "the Father who sent" Jesus (e.g., 5:37) and as the Father of the Son (e.g., 5:17-23). This already indicates that God himself is not the direct focus of attention in John's gospel. This distinction belongs to Jesus. For the Jews already believed in God; the issue was whether they would believe that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. Thus Jesus' relationship with God become the inevitable focal point. While Jesus claims oneness with God (e.g., 10:30-39), "the Jews" cast doubts on his paternity, possibly even insinuating that he is an illegitimate child (8:41). In the end, John's readers must make up their own minds: is Jesus' claim that he came from God and is one with him accurate? If so, they must worship Jesus as God and Lord (as Thomas does; cf. 20:28); if not, he is a false Messiah and deserved to die. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, Jesus is lunatic, liar, or Lord—a statement with which John would have wholeheartedly agreed.

2. THE MESSIAH

The entire purpose of John's gospel is tied up with Christology—the study of the person, nature, and role of Christ. John seeks to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (20:30-31). It is to this end that he presents seven selected signs (chaps. 2-11; cf. 20:30-31). "The Jews"—that is, the Jewish

people as a nation, represented by their religious leaders—don't believe, so Jesus focuses his final hours on working with the Twelve (minus Judas), his new messianic community (chaps. 13-17, 20-21).

The striking opening of John's gospel established a connection between God's act of creation through his spoken Word and his act of providing salvation through the incarnate Word, Jesus. The background for this logos Christology is probably the Old Testament understanding that God sends his Word to accomplish his purposes (cf. Isa. 55:10-11); God now claims that this Word has become flesh in Jesus. The term logos appears in John in a christological sense only in the prologue and functions as an umbrella term for Jesus in the rest of the gospel (on Jesus' preexistence, see also 8:58; 17:5).

Jesus presents himself as the Son of the Father, a formulation that later became important for the church's development of its trinitarian theology. Jesus employs here a metaphor rooted in Jewish life, that is, the sending of a son by his father. A son, especially one's firstborn, could be uniquely trusted to be faithful in carrying out his father's commission.

While the designation of Jesus as Son blends elements of his humanity and deity, other elements of John's Christology focus more explicitly on Jesus' divine nature. Among these are the following:

1. Jesus as the preexisted "Word" (1:1, 14) as well as other claims to Jesus' preexistence (8:58; 12:41; 17:5)
2. Jesus' "signs" (e.g., 2:11; 4:54)
3. Jesus' "I am" sayings, which allude to the Old Testament name of God (cf. esp. Exod. 3:14; Isa. 43:10-13, 25; 45:18; 48:12; 51:12; 52:6)
4. Jesus' possession of supernatural knowledge (1:48: Nathanael under the fig tree; 2:19: nature of Jesus' death [cf. 12:24]; 6:64 and 13:11: Judas' betrayal; Lazarus' death; 13:38: Peter's denials; 21:18-19: nature of Peter's death; see also 2:24-25; 16:19; 18:4; 19:28; and the references to Jesus' "hour": 7:30; 8:20; and 13:1, 3)
5. Thomas' confession, "my Lord and my God" (20:28), a mirror image of the designation awarded to the Roman emperor at the time of writing

Nevertheless, while John emphasizes Jesus' deity and preexistence, he does not therefore neglect to present Jesus as thoroughly human:

1. He has a human family (1:45; 2:12; 6:42; 7:3-8; 19:25-26).
2. He is worn out and thirsty (4:6-7; 19:28).
3. He weeps when he loses a friend (11:33,35).
4. He is perceived by others as a man (Pilate: "ecce homo" [Latin "here is the human being"], 19:5).
5. He dies (19:30) and is buried (19:38-42).

There is, of course, much common ground with the Synoptic Gospels. Like Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John portrays Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God (culminating in 20:30-31) as well as the Son of Man (1:51; 3:13-14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 34; 13:31; esp. the "lifted-up" sayings in 3:14; 8:28; and 12:31-32).

3. SALVATION

Some have argued that John, in good gnostic style, teaches salvation by revelation. These scholars argue that the concept of a penal substitutionary atonement (Jesus died in our place bearing the penalty we deserved) is foreign to John's thought. However, several passages in John's gospel refute this claim: John the Baptist's designation of Jesus as "the lamb of God" (1:29, 36); Caiaphas's prophecy that Jesus would die "for the people" (11:49-52); and references to Jesus's death in chapter 6 and 10 in terms of a vicarious sacrifice (the bread of life, the good shepherd).

For the most part, John presupposes rather than explicitly develops the concept of substitutionary atonement, as he does with regard to many other features of the Synoptic Gospels. It is also true that John presents Jesus as the final revelation of God (see esp. 1:18). Nevertheless, it is illegitimate to argue that the cross functions in John solely as the revelation of God's love and not also as redemptive. If so, we may ask why did God have to reveal himself in such a gruesome way when only revelation, not substitutionary atonement, was at stake?

Another important aspect of John's soteriology is the universal call of the gospel through Jesus. Jesus is "the Savior of the world" (4:42) and offers salvation to "everyone who believes" (e.g., 3:15-16).

4. THE SPIRIT

Of all the gospels, John has the most explicit teaching on the Holy Spirit (see esp. chaps 14-16). Only in this gospel is the term *parakletos* (perhaps meaning "advocate" or "helping presence") used to designate the Holy Spirit. The context for Jesus' teaching on the Holy Spirit in John's gospel is Jesus' own imminent "departure" from his disciples. The emphasis lies on the continuity between Jesus' teaching and the Holy Spirit's mission (cf. esp. 3:13; 17:18; 20:21) of explaining that teaching (see, e.g., 16:12-15). Rather than acting independently, the Holy Spirit thus subordinates himself and his mission to Jesus.

Only three designations are used for the Spirit:

1. The Paraclete ("advocate" or "helping presence")
2. The Holy Spirit (focusing on the Spirit's holiness)
3. The Spirit of truth (focusing on the Spirit's truthfulness)

The functions of the Spirit vary, they include:

1. Indwelling believers (14:16-17)
2. Teaching and guiding believers (14:26; 16:13)
3. Witnessing to and convicting the world (16:7-11)

John describes the "procession" of the Spirit from the Father and the Son (14:26: "whom the Father will send in my name"; 15:26: whom I will send to you from the Father"). The Father and Son send the Spirit to indwell this new covenant community as they are sent by Jesus (the one sent by the Father) to make disciples.

5. THE NEW COVENANT COMMUNITY

The word "church" (*ekklesia*) does not occur in John's gospel, but neither does it occur in any of the other gospels, except for two references in Matthew (16:18; 18:17). John's ecclesiology—study of the church—is instead centered on Jesus as the new Israel (esp. chap. 15), with Jesus' followers pictured as branches of Jesus, the new vine (15:2-8; cf. Ps. 80:9-16; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1). Another metaphor for the church in Gospel of John is that of a flock with Jesus as the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep (chaps. 10, 17; 21:15-23; cf. Ps. 23; Isa. 40:11; Jer. 23:1; Ezek. 34:11).

Generally, the key to understanding John's teaching on the church lies in seeing the important typological Old Testament connections. Jesus is the new Israel, and the Twelve are his new messianic community, representing all believers. At the same time, there remains a distinction between the apostolic eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry and later believers (cf. 15:27; 17:20). Interestingly, there is throughout the gospel a gradual building from a physical following to a spiritual following of Jesus that is not constrained by limits of time and space (cf. 1:35-51; 8:12; 13:34-35).

Some have pointed out that John focuses especially on the need for *individual* believers to put their faith in Jesus. While this is true, however, John balances the necessity of personal faith with teachings on the corporate dimension of the church. He emphasizes the need for mutual love and unity in order for the church's mission to the world to succeed (e.g., 13:34-35; 15:12-13; 17:20-26).

John's gospel strongly emphasizes mission (cf. esp. 3:16; 17:18; 20:21) and envisions the inclusion of the gentiles in God's community (10:16; 11:52; 12:32; 17:20).

Finally, John singles out the term "to believe" (*pisteuo*) as the core of his teaching on requirements for membership in Jesus' messianic community. The term occurs in John almost a hundred times, more often than in all the other gospels combined.

6. LAST THINGS

Many have drawn attention to the "realized eschatology" of John's gospel. According to John, we can have eternal life *now* and already *have* passed from death over into life. Some have taken this to mean that John did not believe in Christ's second coming. But this is clearly not true. He refers several times to God's judgment on the last day (e.g., 3:36; 5:21, 28-29, 39; 6:40, 54; 12:25). Also, the gospel ends with Jesus' charge to his disciples to follow him until he returns (21:22, 23).

John demonstrably has a sense of redemptive history. His eschatological outlook is not akin to gnostic-style dualism (between matter and spirit) but reflects the Jewish distinction between "this age" and "the age to come." At the same time, John clearly accentuates the need for people to repent and believe in Jesus now in light of eternal realities at stake. This sharpens his evangelistic appeal and lends urgency to his missionary call.

What the Synoptic Gospels describe in terms of the kingdom of God, John refers to as "(eternal) life." As George Ladd points out, "While the idiom is different, and we are not to identify the Kingdom of God and eternal life, the underlying theological structure is the same, though expressed in different categories."

John's substitution of the generic, universal term "(eternal) life" is for the more historically and ethnically constrained term "kingdom of God." Paul, similar to John features "life" much more frequently than "kingdom." As might be expected, 1, 2, and 3 John and the book of Revelation display the same pattern as John's gospel.

Knowing these themes will help as we walk through the book of John.

We have concluded the following:

1. While John almost certainly knew of the existence of the Synoptic Gospels and probably read one or more of them, he clearly did not follow their account very closely; John and the Synoptics should therefore be regarded as independent witnesses to the same Jesus in whom the gospel centers, complementary portraits of one and the same person and history. At the same time, John reflects his knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels more indirectly by his pattern of theological transposition, retelling Jesus' story, as it were, in a different key.
2. John was steeped in Old Testament language and theological themes and consciously related events in the life of Jesus to previous events in the history of Israel. The apostle sought to fill the void left by the events of A.D. 70 with his presentation of Jesus as the new temple and as the fulfillment of the symbolism of the various Jewish festivals in effort to persuade, particularly, Diaspora Jews and proselytes that the Messiah and Son of God was in fact Jesus.

3. John's teaching on major subjects was as follows:

- a) *God*: God sent Jesus and is the Father of the Son.
- b) *The Messiah*: Jesus is both human and divine; the preexistent, incarnate Word; the Son of God, Son of Man, and Messiah; the Son of the Father; the signs-working "I am"; and the Savior.
- c) *Salvation*: Jesus's death redeems, is "for others"; that is, it effects substitutionary atonement. At the same Jesus's death also reveals God's love for a sinful world. John portrays Jesus' death as not (primarily) a shameful, painful event, but rather as merely a station on Jesus' way back to the Father and as the place where, and the hour when, God is glorified.
- d) *The Spirit*: The Spirit is "another helping presence" similar to Jesus. He will teach and guide Jesus' followers and through them, convict the world of its sin of unbelief in Jesus. The Spirit will also empower the disciples' mission and provide continuity with the earthly mission of Jesus.
- e) *The new covenant community*: Jesus is the new Israel, and his new messianic community is characterized by one thing only: faith in Jesus the Messiah. In keeping with Old Testament imagery, John depicts believers in Jesus as Jesus' "flock" and as "branches" of Jesus, the new vine. The new messianic community is to be characterized by mutual love and unity so that its mission to be world may go forth unhindered.
- f) *Last things*: Eternal life is available through Jesus already in the here and now, not just in the afterlife. At the same time, Jesus will be God's agent on the final day of judgment. Believers are to follow him until he returns. The Synoptic teaching on the kingdom of God is transposed into John's teaching on eternal life.

Conclusion

May we grow in treasuring Jesus, in the depth of our friendships, and in our Spirit-empowered, bold evangelism as we study the book of John together as church. And may many come to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing they may have life in His name" (20:31).