

## The Writings of John

### *Introduction*

The whole outlook of John's writings teach us about the deity of Jesus. But in order to understand his writing we have to first understand a little about the man himself. We get a majority of our information about John from the pages of the four gospels. We know that John was the younger brother of James and the son of Zebedee (Mark 10:35; Luke 5:10). John was one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, although his story extends many years past the earthly ministry of Jesus. John was known as an apostle, author, and is traditionally believed to be the only apostle who was not killed by martyrdom. Although it is not directly stated, it is traditionally believed that John referred to himself as, "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (John 21:20-24). This statement can be viewed in two ways. We can view it as an arrogant statement where John points to himself as a special case for the love of Jesus. Or we can view it as a statement of humility. The fact that John nowhere in his gospel refers to himself by name suggests that this may be the case here and John prefers to leave out any personal information and instead give the reader only the important facts about Jesus. John may simply be saying that he knows what it is to be loved by Jesus and recognises how much that love means and how deep it goes.

It is believed by some that John and James were cousins to Jesus because their mother, Salome, was the sister of Jesus' mother Mary (see Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25), but this connection to Mary is only implied in the gospels. Before he and his brother James became Jesus' disciples his occupation was as a fisherman. The two brothers were among the first disciples of Jesus. Based on the language in chapter 1 of John's gospel, it is believed that John was probably the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:35-39), although, as we have stated, John never refers to himself directly by name. Both John and James seem to have been even tempered men, although there is one story at the end of Luke 9, where they asked Jesus if He wanted them to call down fire from Heaven to consume the unbelieving Samaritans. Not surprisingly this led to Jesus calling the two brothers, the sons of thunder. This tells us, of course, that they may not have been as completely mild mannered as they seem (Mark 3:17; Luke 9:51-56).

We know that Peter, James and John had a special relationship with Jesus because many times the Bible talks about these three and excludes the other disciples. They were with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration where they received a special revelation of Jesus' glory and deity, (Matthew 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36). They were with Jesus for the healing of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37), and they also formed the inner circle of prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37).

### *John the Author*

John wrote 5 books in the New Testament. He wrote The Gospel of John, the epistles First, Second and Third John, and The Revelation of Jesus Christ, where John wrote about the vision he received when he was banished to the Greek island of Patmos on the Aegean sea. All of his books were written later in his life and after all the other books in the Bible were recorded. We don't know the exact time or order in which the books were written, but here are some possible dates:

The Gospel According to John: AD 80 to 98

First, Second and Third John: AD 90 to 95

The Revelation of Jesus Christ: AD 94 to 98

Of course we know God inspired the Bible and that it was written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and this explains why the book of John is still relevant to believers today. John witnessed the growth of the early church and had first hand experience of the questions being raised in the 50 plus years after the resurrection of Jesus. He knew the doubts that had been raised and how to answer the questions of the early Christian church.

The Epistles of John were written to various audiences. They were all written after John was an old man living in Ephesus. The first epistle was not addressed to anyone in particular, but was written more as a sermon. The second epistle was written to an unnamed "*elect lady*," and the third to a man named Gaius.

There are three men who bear that name to whom the letter could have been written. There was a Gaius in Macedonia (Acts 19: 29), Corinth (Rom. 16:23), and Derbe (Acts 20:4).

The book of The Revelation of Jesus Christ was written by John probably close to the same time he wrote the epistles. The Revelation was, as we know, written about the vision that John received while banished to the Greek island of Patmos on the Aegean sea. Tradition says that this was after John had been sentenced to death by martyrdom. This tradition says that John was sentenced to death in a boiling vat of oil, but he emerged unharmed from the experience and was sent, by order of the Roman emperor Domitian, to the penal colony of Patmos. It was here in a place that is now known as 'The Cave of The Apocalypse', that The Revelation was given to the apostle John by Jesus.

### *John the Martyr*

We know little about John's later life and death from the Bible. The most insightful bit of information we do have comes from John 21, when the risen Jesus was talking to Peter about Peter's death. After Jesus told Peter that he would not live long Peter asked about John's death. Jesus replied that if John lived until His return, that was not Peter's concern. This was not a promise that John would live until Jesus returned, but it does indicate that the Lord knew John would live a long time (John 21:20-23). Again tradition tells us that John lived into old age dying sometime after AD 98 when he is thought to have died in Ephesus, aged about 94.

### *The Gospel of John*

There is a striking difference between the first three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are known together as the Synoptic Gospels, (synoptic means "see together"), and the Gospel of John. In fact, the Gospel of John is so unique that 90 percent of the material it contains regarding Jesus' life cannot be found in the other Gospels. Unlike the other gospels John opens his with a prologue, an introductory statement that leads us into his gospel writing. This majestic prologue echoes statements from Genesis ("in the beginning," and he also mentions creation and light). His prologue does, however, begin with the Word, who was with God from the beginning, the Word was God, and the Word is the one through whom God is definitively revealed (chapter 1:1, 18).

There are many speculations for the uniqueness of John's gospel and one explanation concerns the different ways each Gospel writer focused specifically on the person and work of Jesus. In Mark's Gospel, for example, Jesus is portrayed primarily as the authoritative, miracle-working Son of God. Mark wanted to establish Jesus' identity within the framework of a new generation of disciples. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the fulfilment of the O. T. Law and prophecies. Matthew takes great pains to express Jesus not simply as the Messiah prophesied in the O. T. (see Matt. 1:21), but also as the new Moses (see chapters 5-7), the new Abraham (1:1-2), and the descendant of David's royal line (1:1,6). While Matthew focused on Jesus' role as the long-expected salvation of the Jewish people, Luke's Gospel emphasized Jesus role as Saviour of all peoples. Therefore, Luke intentionally connects Jesus with a number of outcasts in the society of His day, including women, the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, and more. Luke portrays Jesus not only as the powerful Messiah but also as a divine friend of sinners who came expressly to "*seek and save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). In summary, the Synoptic writers were generally concerned with demographics in their portrayals of Jesus, they wanted to show that Jesus the Messiah was connected with Jews, Gentiles, outcasts, and other groups of people. Because they share a similar view of Jesus, this "seeing together" has led to them being called the synoptic gospels. In contrast, John's portrayal of Jesus is concerned with theology more than demographics.

John lived in a time where theological debates and heresies were becoming more and more popular. These included Gnosticism\* (see note below), and other ideologies that denied either Jesus' divine or human nature. These controversies were the tip of the iceberg that led to the great debates and councils of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries (the Council of Nicaea, the Council of Constantinople, and so on), many of which revolved around the mystery of Jesus' nature as both fully God and fully man.

Essentially, many people of John's day were asking themselves questions like, "Who exactly was Jesus? What was He like?" The earliest misconceptions of Jesus portrayed Him as a good man, but not actually God. In the midst of these debates, John's Gospel is a thorough exploration of Jesus Himself. It is interesting to note that while the term "*kingdom*" is spoken of by Jesus 47 times in Matthew, 18 times in Mark, and 37 times in Luke, it is only mentioned 5 times by Jesus in the gospel of John. At the same time, while Jesus uses the pronoun "*I*" only 17 times in Matthew, 9 times in Mark, and 10 times in Luke, He says "*I*" 118 times in John. The gospel of John is all about Jesus explaining His own nature and purpose in this world. One of John's major purposes and themes was to correctly portray Jesus as the divine Word (or Logos), the pre-existent Son who is one with God (John 10:30), and yet took on flesh in order to "tabernacle" Himself among us (1:14). In other words, John took a lot of pains to make it crystal clear that Jesus was indeed God in human form. The four Gospels of the N. T. function perfectly as four sections of the same story. Yet, while it's true that the Synoptic Gospels are similar in many ways, the uniqueness of John's Gospel only benefits the larger story by bringing additional content, new ideas, and a more thoroughly clarified explanation of Jesus Himself. The most prominent and complete explanation of Jesus is found in the Prologue of John's gospel which we will look at next time.

\*Gnosticism was a second century heresy (a belief or opinion that is contrary to Scripture), claiming that salvation could only be gained through secret knowledge. Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "to know" or "knowledge." Gnostics also believed that the created, material world (matter) is evil, and therefore in opposition to the world of the spirit, and that only the spirit is good. They constructed an evil God and beings of the Old Testament to explain the creation of the world (matter) and considered Jesus to be a wholly spiritual God. Gnostic beliefs clash strongly with accepted Christian doctrine. Christianity teaches that salvation is available to everyone, not just a special few and that it comes from grace through faith in Jesus (Eph. 2:8-9), and not from study or works. Christianity asserts that the only source of truth is the Bible. Gnostics were divided on Jesus. One view held that he only appeared to have human form but that he was actually spirit only. The other view said that his divine spirit came upon his human body at baptism and departed before the crucifixion. Christianity holds that Jesus was fully man and fully God and that his human and divine natures were both present and necessary to provide a suitable sacrifice for humanity's sin. The New Bible Dictionary gives this outline of Gnostic beliefs: "The supreme God dwelt in unapproachable splendour in this spiritual world, and had no dealings with the world of matter. Matter was the creation of an inferior being, the Demiurge (a heavenly being, subordinate to the Supreme Being, who is considered to be the controller of the material world and in opposition, or hostile to all that is purely spiritual). He, (the Demiurge), along with his aides the archōns, kept mankind imprisoned within their material existence, and barred the path of individual souls trying to ascend to the spirit world after death. Not even this possibility was open to everyone, however. For only those who possessed a divine spark (pneuma) could hope to escape from their corporeal existence. And even those possessing such a spark did not have an automatic escape, for they needed to receive the enlightenment of *gnōsis* before they could become aware of their own spiritual condition. In most of the Gnostic systems reported by the church Fathers, this enlightenment is the work of a divine redeemer, who descends from the spiritual world in disguise and is often equated with the Christian Jesus. Salvation for the Gnostic, therefore, is to be alerted to the existence of his divine pneuma and then, as a result of this knowledge, to escape on death from the material world to the spiritual." Gnostic writings are extensive. Many so called Gnostic Gospels are presented as "lost" books of the Bible, but in fact did not meet the criteria when the canon was formed (the canon of scripture, is a list of books considered to be authoritative scripture by a particular religious community. The word "canon" comes from the Greek meaning "rule" or "measuring stick"). In many instances, they contradict the Bible.