

The Gospel of John

1. Introduction

The Gospel of John is traditionally ascribed to John the son of Zebedee, who, according to some commentators, is to be identified with an unnamed disciple, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (the Beloved Disciple: cf. 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20; cf. 1:35-42; 18:15-18). Discussion of this attribution must take into account the possible difference between 'author' and 'authority (behind the text)' in a first-century context, as well as the likely dating of John's Gospel (around 85-95 CE).

2. Content of John's Gospel

- i) A Prologue which places Jesus in a cosmic context (1:1-18).
- ii) 'Book of Signs': an account of the public ministry of Jesus, comprising primarily of Jesus' signs (miraculous deeds), discourses, and confrontations with the Jewish authorities (1:19-12:50).
- iii) 'Book of Glory': Jesus withdraws to address 'his own' (the disciples) in a series of discourses (13:1-17:25), followed by the Johannine version of Jesus' arrest, trial(s), crucifixion and resurrection appearances in Jerusalem (18-20).
- iv) A Johannine Epilogue (21:1-24).

3. John: 'The Maverick Gospel'

3.1 The Spiritual Gospel Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-220): 'John, last of all, realizing that the physical facts had been set forth in the Gospels, being urged by his friends and divinely moved by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel' (quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI.14.7).

- John's relationship with the Synoptic Gospels is complex. There are many points of contact in terms of their literary genre ('gospel'), outline of events, and even individual phrases (cf. Mark 2:11 and John 5:8). There are, however, many differences between John and the Synoptics (including Mark): chronology (length of Jesus' ministry: cf. John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55; dating of Jesus' death: cf. 13:1, 29; 19:31) and geography (Judaean-centred ministry); the content and style of Jesus' teaching.
- Could John i) have been familiar with oral (rather than written) Synoptic traditions; ii) have been literarily dependent on one or more of the Synoptic Gospels, iii) have been familiar with one or more of the Gospels?

3.2 The Socio-Historical Situation of 'the Johannine Community One distinctive feature of John's Gospel is its threefold reference to 'Johannine Christians' being cast out of the synagogue (*aposynagōgos*: 9:22; 12:42; 116:2).

This is different from those examples in Gospel traditions where Jewish Christians are said to experience discipline from the synagogue in the form of punishment and interrogation (Mark 13:9; Matt. 10:17-18; Luke 21:6) or physical beating (Acts 9:2; 26:11; II Cor. 11:24). John's narrative (particularly passages like John 9) is often described as a 'two-level drama' (reflecting the situation of the historical Jesus and the situation of the evangelist and his community).

3.3 Johannine Expression of the Gospel's Aim(s): 'But these [the signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (20:31).

- This statement emphasizes the importance of i) faith (missionary/evangelistic or is it directed at those who already believe?); ii) salvation (gift of eternal life); iii) both faith and salvation as inextricably linked to the Gospel's distinctive presentation of the identity and role of Jesus ('christology'). This is the focus of John's narratives and discourses from beginning to end.
- The Johannine Jesus is frequently depicted as defending his christological assertions in confrontation with 'the Jews' (= probably the Jewish religious authorities; cf. 5:18-19; 10:33). Exalted claims about Jesus were the cause or, possibly, the result of the separation of believers forming 'the Johannine community'.

4. Jesus' Identity and Significance according to John

- **Jesus as Son and as 'the One who is Sent'** Jesus speaks openly about his origin and identity from the outset of the Gospel narrative (no Johannine 'messianic secret'). To express his intimate (and unique) relationship with the Father, Jesus is described as 'the only Son' (1:14; 3:16, 18) who is loved by the Father (5:20; 10:17) and to whom he has 'placed all things in his hands' (3:35).

Jesus is the one sent into the world (3:17; 10:36): different from the Synoptic Gospels, the language of divine sonship and agency ('the one who is sent') is used by Jesus to express his consciousness of his eternal status as Son: 'I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence' (8:38). Jesus testifies to what he, and he alone, has seen and heard in heaven before he was sent into the world. The words and works of the Son are not his own but those of the Father (cf. 5:36; 8:28; 12:49-50; 14:10).

- **Jesus as the Definitive Revelation of God** To see Jesus is to see the Father (12:45; 14:9) and whoever knows him knows the Father (8:19;

14:7). Like the Father, he has the power to judge and to give life (5:21, 27). The coming of Jesus amounts to the judgement of this world (12:31).

- **Jesus Fulfills God's Plan for/in the World** He commits himself to the will of the Father: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (4:34). He is fully obedient to the Father's plan in that he willingly follows the path of the cross (cf. 13:27; 18:4-8; 19:30). 'No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (10:18; cf. 19:30: 'It is completed/finished').
- **Jesus as the Divine 'I AM'**
 - i) Metaphorical 'I am' statements. On seven occasions *egô eimi* ('I am') is linked to a symbol or metaphor (e.g., 6:35; 8:12; 15:1); these are linked to scriptural promises of divine salvation and express Jesus' role as the giver/gift of eternal life.
 - ii) Absolute 'I am' statements. In other passages the same expression (*egô eimi*) is not followed by a symbol/predicate but is used in an absolute sense to evoke the use of 'I AM' by the God of Israel (Exod. 3:14, but see in particular Deut. 32:39; Isa. 41:4; 43:10; 46:4; 48:12; 51:12; 52:6). As in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus pronounces this solemn divine self-declaration to convey the exclusiveness of his claim, his eternal existence, his role as the one who reveals divine salvation (cf. John 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5-8).
The Johannine Jesus can declare *egô eimi* in this manner because he is the eternal Word incarnate, the Son who speaks and acts in unity with the Father, the unique revelation of God.

Reading List

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R.A. Culpepper, *Jesus the Son of Zebedee" The Life and Legend* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

R.A. Culpepper, 'The Christology of the Johannine Writings', *Who Do You Say that I Am? Essays on Christology*, eds. M.A. Powell & D.R. Bauer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 66-87.

L.T. Johnson, 'The Gospel of John', *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (London: SCM, 2002), 525-57.

C.H. Williams, "I Am" or "I Am He"? Self-Declaratory Pronouncements in the

Fourth Gospel and Rabbinic Tradition', *Jesus in Johannine Tradition*, eds. R.T. Fortna & T. Thatcher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 343-52.