

## An Introduction to John's Gospel

### **Who?**

Of the four gospels, it is the most difficult to draw any concrete conclusions regarding author and date for the book assigned to John. Whereas Matthew, Mark and Luke share enough material with one another to be classified as a block (the synoptics), and therefore compared to one another, John is an altogether different animal.

The early church understood the synoptics as a historical account of the life of Jesus and John as a sort of theological commentary on that history. The prologue to the gospel in chapter 1 offers up an understanding of the divinity of Jesus that the other gospels hint at, but never make explicit. This makes a later date, as the theology of the church began to take shape, quite likely.

But what do we make of 'the disciple Jesus loved'? Whereas Mark is traced back to Peter, with his translator being a candidate for the author, and both Matthew and Luke follow Mark in making Peter central to the narrative, John uses the unnamed 'disciple' as his chief eyewitness to events. It is presumably by comparing John's account to the synoptics that this character is identified as 'John', the son of Zebedee, who went with Peter and James to the tomb after Jesus' resurrection.

If the 'disciple Jesus loved' is indeed John, son of Zebedee, and if he is the source of the gospel's narrative, then perhaps John could have been written earlier than the other gospels. Herein lies the mystery. Further to these issues of authorship is the connection between John's gospel and the Epistles of John, which share much of the same theology and a similar writing style. The author of these letters identifies himself as 'The Elder' and it is conjectured that perhaps we have here another branch of the church, at a slight remove from the Pauline churches, to which most of the New Testament letters are written.

Identifying the gospel of John with a Johannine community, to whom the letters of John were also written makes a good deal of sense. It explains the slightly different theology of the gospel and gives us a school of authors who may have written and/or edited John's gospel.

### **When?**

As it is difficult to pin down an author, so it is hard to date John's gospel. The consensus of opinion puts it somewhere between 85 and 100AD, although there are some who think it could have been written as early as 50AD and others who contend that it must be a second century document.

### **Why?**

The author of John's gospel tells us in chapter 20:30-31 that the book was written so that the reader might believe that Jesus is the Messiah. This appears to be the major purpose of the book and it is arranged around a series of seven signs that point to Jesus as the Messiah. There is also a dualist nature to John's gospel, as the author delineates between light and dark, truth and lies, knowledge and ignorance. The point of this seems to be that the document is written to counter the claims of a group called the Gnostics, who said that access to salvation was only via a secret knowledge. The Gnostics were dualists as well, but John wants to present Jesus, not as secret knowledge, but as a character that everyone can come to know through his writings.

John's gospel presents Jesus as the Messiah who is accessible to everyone and it gives us a slightly different view of the events of his life than the synoptic gospels, presenting Jesus in the light of the developing theology of the early church.