

Suggested Reading

A Recommended Reading

John 1:19 – 1:51.

B Read Carefully

John: 1:19-34

John the Baptist

John: 1:35-51

Call of the disciples

C Compare this section with:

John 1:50 - 51 = Genesis: 28:10 - 17 *Jacob's Ladder*

Prayer

O God, who through the blessed apostle John
have unlocked for us the secrets of your Word,
grant, we pray,
that we might grasp with proper understanding
what he so marvellously brought to our ears,
Through Christ our Lord Amen.
(From the Feast of St. John)

PFP v2/2026

Sacred Heart Catholic Church

Henley on Thames



The Prologue

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John 1: 1-18.



Since earliest times, the Gospel according to John has been known as '*the Spiritual Gospel*'. This description is fitting, as the Fourth Gospel draws readers deeply into a spiritual relationship with Jesus. It has also been described as a pool in which an infant can paddle and an elephant can swim. As an introduction to the Gospel, we shall venture somewhere between the two.

The reader is drawn decisively into the Johannine world, by the magisterial use of language, poetic structure, and the introduction of theological concepts which brings us into a world view very different to that of the Synoptic Gospels.

The Prologue

Each of the Gospels seeks to educate or prepare the reader for the rest of the Gospel. The Johannine prologue has rightly been compared to an overture, that has in miniature all of the themes which will later come to the fore in a great symphony. These include light, life, glory: a great amount of information concerning Jesus is conveyed, but perhaps most significantly, his divinity is traced, not from his baptism, or his birth, or his conception, but before time itself.

verses 1 - 2

'In the beginning' – The first words of the Gospel echo the book of Genesis (Gen 1:1) and mark a new beginning.

In the beginning (A) was the Word (B),
the Word (B) was with God (C)
and what God (C) was, the Word (B') was.
He was (B') with God in the beginning (A').

A In the beginning
B was the Word and the Word
C was with God and what God was
B' the Word was.
A' He was with God in the beginning

This (chiastic) structure places the emphasis on the central stanza in these verses – *the Word was with God and the Word was God*. The English translation *'with'* is rather weak, and lacks the dynamic sense of the Greek, *'turned towards'*; which suggests that the Word was turned towards, focused on and in relation with = God, and vice versa.

verse 14

Verse 14 begins with the celebrated expression:

'and the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us'

Next Week

The First Week

We will study the rest of Chapter One. This section has been entitled *'the first week of a new creation'* because of a reference to seven days – see if you can spot this [1+1+1+1+3]. It is another reference to the Book of Genesis. Another is the reference to the ladder – the experience of the patriarch Jacob.

The chapter is in two parts:

Firstly, the role of John (the Baptist). Who is he? Or perhaps, more accurately, who is he not? It is he who points towards Jesus. How are his words used in the Communion Rite at Mass?

Secondly, the call of the first disciples, and the revelation of Jesus through a series of titles: Lamb of God, Messiah, the one of whom the prophets wrote, the King of Israel, the Son of Man.

What do these titles mean?

Why is it important that John refers to the Lamb and Nathaniel to the King of Israel?

Which title does Jesus' use to describe himself?

The Gospel of John.

The structure is simple to understand as it has two parts:

The three-year ministry of Jesus (called the Book of Signs) a reference to the miracles of Jesus [John 1,19 – 12:50]

The Last Supper to the Day of Resurrection (called the Book of Glory) a reference to the Passion, Death & Resurrection. [John 13: 1- 20:31]

John 1:1 - 18 The Prologue.

The introduction to the Gospel

John 1:19- 51 The titles of Jesus

John the Baptist and the call of the disciples

John 2:1 - 4:54 From Cana to Cana

The first sign at Cana: Wedding, replacement of the Temple, Nicodemus, Woman at well, second sign at Cana: cure of Royal Official's Son.

John 5:1 - 10:42 The Feasts of Israel

Cure on the Sabbath. The Bread of Life Discourse: Pentecost. The Feast of Tabernacles: water & light. Man born blind: water & light. Feast of Dedication: the Good Shepherd discourse.

John 11:1 - 12:50 Climax of Jesus' public ministry.

The raising of Lazarus. Anointed for burial. Entry to Jerusalem. The coming of the 'hour'.

John 13:1 - 17:26 The Last Supper

Washing of feet. Abiding: the True Vine. The promise of the Advocate.

John 18:1 – 19:42 Trial and Crucifixion

John 20:1 – 20:31 Appearances after the Resurrection

Mary Magdalene, Thomas, Purpose of the Gospel

John 21:1 – 21:25 Appearances after the Resurrection

Lakeside, Peter & Beloved Disciple, Conclusion.

The verb used could mean simply “to dwell” or “to live;” but there is certainly an allusion to the holy tabernacle of the Exodus. Figurately, to pitch his tent, is to echo the glory of the Lord which filled the “tabernacle of the tent of meeting” (*Exod 40:34-38*). The dwelling of the Word, is ‘among us.’ Compare this with the prologue to the First Letter of St John, where the emphasis is upon the physical encounter with the Word made flesh, which is something *we* have seen, and touched.

‘*We have seen his glory*’: Receiving the Word, believing in his name gave power to become children of God. One does not have to wait for the end-time to become a child of God; it can happen already if one receives the Word by believing in his name.

Verse 18:

‘No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’.

Where previously we have discussed the dynamic relationship between the Word and God, now and from this point, throughout the Fourth Gospel we explore the relationship between Jesus and the Father, because he is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’.

Pope Benedict XVI seems to imply that this is one of the most important verses in the New Testament: ‘[Jesus] lives before the face of God, not just as a friend, but as a Son; he lives in the most intimate unity with the father. We have to start here if we are truly to understand the figure of Jesus as it is presented to us in the New Testament’.

Such is the importance of the Johannine prologue, which offers the reader privileged information (who Jesus is – the Son of God- where he is from – from God). None of the characters in the Gospel have access to this information, they will have to learn for themselves.

Author, Place and Date.

Authorship in antiquity was not as clearly defined as today. For certain, Paul was the author of the epistles attributed to him, but he did not write them – he would have used a scribe.

As we shall see, later, there was a process of composition prior to the writing of the Gospel, which included, the teaching of the Apostles and eyewitnesses, the theological reflection on the words of Jesus, after the resurrection and in the light of the Old Testament, and the experience of the early Church. Each of these stages, helped to form the Gospel.

Author

Traditionally, the author of the Fourth Gospel has been identified John, son of Zebedee. However, today in a word, we do not know who the author was. It is probably the Beloved Disciple, known as John. Or the author of the Letters or a minor disciple. There is an emphasis upon the eyewitness account, which favours the Beloved Disciple.

Place

Ephesus remains the most likely place from where the Gospel originates. There has been an almost unanimous voice of ancient witnesses. However, recently scholars have suggested two stages in the composition. Such an argument emphasises the importance of geography, in the Gospel and the accurate knowledge and descriptions of several Palestinian locations. The discovery of five porticos at the pool of Bethzatha (John 5:2-13) and other archaeological evidence, e.g., Sychar/Shechem has supported the proposal that many of the narratives within the Fourth Gospel are some of the earliest compiled within the New Testament and that the memory of the community supports its presence in the area.

It seems probable that the Gospel may have been composed in Northern TransJordan, with the Johannine Community moving to Ephesus at the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66-73 AD.

Date

The advancement of carbon dating has made a significant impact on the dating of the Fourth Gospel. Fragments of the Gospel have been carbon dated to 60/70 years prior to previous theories, which had placed the Gospel in the mid-second century 150ad. Today most scholars would date the Gospel approx. 90 AD (with a variance of 10 years) but some would argue even earlier, due to the accurate knowledge of Jerusalem and Israel prior to the Jewish war (when it was destroyed) and possible links with the Synoptic Gospels.

John and the Synoptic Gospels

It is proper and correct to describe each Gospel as '*according to X*'. This is because while there are four Gospels, there is only one Jesus, and in this sense 'one Gospel'. The Church has cherished its four-fold understanding of Jesus, with its unity but not uniformity.

In the past, scholars have emphasised the differences between John and the Synoptics; calling Matthew, Mark & Luke = **Synoptic** (one vision) and John, the **Fourth Gospel** (as a means of emphasising its separation).

Today, this is not the case. There is much more emphasis on the crucial significance of '*according to X*'. John is not the only gospel and should be held within the unity of the Gospel genre, Jesus the Word of God, the Good News and the Gospel itself. It is the good news of Jesus.

Recent studies place more emphasis upon the links between John and the Synoptic Gospels. Some identify links between the Gospel of John & Mark; others establish links between John & Luke, especially with regard to the Passion and Resurrection.

It is valuable to place the Gospel of John within the unity of the Gospels as a whole, and to allow in places his singular vision to illuminate our understanding of Jesus anew.