

JOHN

John was the brother of **James**, the two sons of a man called Zebedee who ran a fishing business on the Sea of Galilee. Their mother was probably **Salome**, the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus, a faithful disciple. John never names himself in his gospel, but uses the pseudonym ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’. His style is scholarly and meditative – at times almost mystical. He tells us plainly that he chose to write his gospel to show that Jesus was the Messiah (the King promised to Israel) and the Son of God. He selects eight great miracles that Jesus wrought, and looks carefully at the evidence which to his mind proves Jesus’ claims beyond reasonable doubt.

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

John does not set out to tell us everything that Jesus did. He homes in on particular events and places, recalling in great detail the actual words used by Jesus and his enemies, like a television news reporter standing on the spot. His account of the Last Supper, for example, runs to five whole chapters. He really makes you feel you have been in the presence of the Lord.

It is fascinating to follow some of John’s great themes. He starts off, for example, with **light and darkness**. He likens God’s opening day in the creation week to the beginning of Jesus’ work as the light of the world – a point when the darkness that fills human hearts was pushed back as Jesus came to show people face to face what God is really like. The glory of God, familiar to the Jews as a bright cloud in the Tabernacle or Temple, becomes the revealed love and truth and holiness of a carpenter who is the Son of God. John shows Jesus open the eyes of a man blind from birth by getting him to

wash away the mask of clay over his eyes in the water of the Pool of Siloam. Siloam, John points out, means ‘Sent’. Jesus had been sent, to open closed minds, and to light the way to eternal life.

Another theme is ‘**the hour**’ of destiny. As Jesus proceeds through his ministry, John sees him protected by his Father from stonings and plots to kill him, because his hour had not yet come. He had a task to complete. But as he comes to the end of his work at the Last Supper, the time runs out. The hour has come. He goes forth to meet his enemies, and a cruel death.

John underlines the many miracles Jesus worked on the **Sabbath day**. He chose to break the convention that healing was work, because, he says, His Father was still busy at work, bringing about the true Sabbath rest of a Kingdom where disease, part of the Curse that came from Adam’s sin, will be removed for ever.

Often John picks up allusions to Jesus’ work in the Old Testament, or the fulfilment of direct quotations, where the disciples did not realise the connection at the time, but were stunned afterwards to find everything that had been predicted had come true. This is still one of the most powerful arguments there is for believing in Jesus. His ministry had been mapped out centuries before by the foreknowledge of God.

A good example would be the turning of the water into wine at the wedding feast (see John chapter two). The house wine had run out. John hints that it represented the Law of Moses, which had been made redundant by the coming of Jesus. The waterpots by the door were used for a ceremonial washing by the guests as they arrived. Such washings cleansed the hands, but did not reach the heart. Jesus was able to transform the contents of the waterpots into a new wine, better than the old, which would transform people’s lives.

Or take the feeding of the five thousand in chapter six. Here John links the loaves that were multiplied in the hands of Jesus to the manna that God fed to the Israelites in the wilderness. Jesus was the bread of life, he says, and without him we shall die in the wilderness of sin.

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey particularly catches John's attention. He had read the passage in Zechariah 9:9 for years, but only after it happened did he realise it was a prophecy waiting to be fulfilled.

“And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!’ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him” (John 12:15, 16).

It is likely John wrote his gospel after the other three, but probably before the Fall of Jerusalem in AD70, because in chapter five he says the Pool of Bethesda, where Jesus healed the paralytic man, is by the Sheep Gate, with five roofed colonnades. This reference would not have been made sense to his readers after Jerusalem was destroyed.

John went on to write three of the letters of the New Testament, similar in style to his gospel. He also received the visions of the book of Revelation, which he penned from enforced exile in the island of Patmos, at the end of his life.

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