

**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

JOHN'S GOSPEL

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When reading ancient writings like the Gospels, it is useful to have some tools to help you read with greater understanding. You need the following tools in your tool box.

A Bible with a good translation, such as the New Revised Standard Version or the New Jerusalem Bible.

As you read this guide, look up the passages and verses that are mentioned in the Gospel.

Some background information about the time when the Gospel was written, the composition of the local community, knowledge about its cultural and religious customs, knowledge of some of the questions and issues that this community had.

This background is particularly important when you realise that what you are reading is the way members of one community answered many of their questions about Jesus. In other words, you are reading their answers. But these answers are meaningless if you do not know their questions. For example, if I say, “the answer is 12.” What question might I be asking? It could be how many months in a year? How many eggs in a dozen? How many weeks until holidays begin? Unless we know the question, the answer does not tell us much at all. So it is with the Gospels. Unless we know the questions faced by the communities at the time of the Gospel, then what we read will not make much sense to us living 2000 years later and in a very different cultural and religious context. This guide will provide you with some of the background and give you tips about where to find out more.

HOW TO READ THIS GUIDE

CURIOSITY - LOOKING FOR CLUES



A third tool that is helpful when reading any narrative, such as a Gospel, is to **recognise clues** that the writer is providing.

I liken this to reading old-fashioned murder mysteries, such as an Agatha Christie novel. In these mysteries, there is often a closed group, such as 20 people on a train, or nine at a dinner party. The murder happens in chapter one, and from then on, as we read, the author provides clues as to the identity of the murderer: a light on at 3.00 am, a page torn from a diary found under the victim, etc.

The goal is that as we read we put all the clues together and when we come to the final chapter we have worked out who the culprit is. We have worked out the answer. John's Gospel needs to be read like this. The author gives us clues in every chapter and we will not get the answer until the cross. If we have followed these clues that John gives us, the story of Jesus' death will come as no surprise.



WHEN? WHERE? WHO?



ABOVE: A REMINDER OF THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM IN 70 CE, FOUND IN THE BURNT HOUSE.

BELOW: THIS ROMAN SPEAR WAS FOUND IN THE REMAINS OF A BURNT HOUSE IN JERUSALEM.



A modern book provides us with the author's name, and information about where it was published and the date. Unfortunately, none of the Gospel manuscripts came with this precise information and so we need to look for secondary evidence such as clues in the Gospel text. Even then, often we only come up with tentative answers, or hypotheses.

WHEN?

A significant date in the first century was the year 70 CE: the Romans finally captured and destroyed Jerusalem after a four-year Jewish uprising. The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple had major consequences for Jews and the early followers of Jesus, who at this stage were mostly Jews.

The Jerusalem Temple had been the focus of Jewish life. Its annual cycle of festivals and the daily sacrifices were important to Jews everywhere, many of whom made long pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the great festivals. Without the Temple, this rich, sacrificial and liturgical life was lost. Without the Temple, sacrifices were no longer needed, priests were not needed, and so the Jewish leadership shifted from the priests to the

teachers (Rabbis). In this traumatic context, the Rabbis set about establishing a Jewish identity that could survive without the Temple. In the 80s and 90s, these Rabbis shifted the focus from Temple sacrifices to living according to Jewish Law: the Torah. It was a time for clarifying Jewish identity.

30 Jesus crucified by Romans
Time of reflection, remembering, oral preaching

50s Letters of Paul

70 Destruction of Jerusalem
Gospel of Mark

80s Gospel of Matthew
Gospel of Luke

90s Gospel of John

JESUS OR MOSES?

At this critical time, those Jews who were no longer focused on Moses and the Law but on Jesus were not welcome in Jewish synagogues. Some Jews, who were praying to Jesus, calling him *divine* and calling him Jesus the Messiah (the Christ), were considered blasphemers or heretics. The Christ-believers, nicknamed Christians, began to establish their own identity separate from Judaism. This gradual process took several centuries.

We find clues in John's Gospel that it was written in the context of such conflict about one's religious identity. Are you a follower of Moses or a follower of Jesus? Only John tells us that those who confessed Jesus as the Christ were put out of the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). Only in John do we have Jesus

clearly being given divine status when Thomas says, “My Lord and my God” (20:28). In John, there is a comparison being made between Moses and Jesus and the reader is being called to make a decision.



These are just some of the clues that led scholars to conclude that John was written in the last decade of the first century. It could not have been written much later than this as some of the earliest fragments of the Gospel have been found in Egypt and dated around 125 CE. So we date the Gospel around 95–100 CE. Also, there is an ancient tradition that this Gospel was the final Gospel.

WHO

Twice in the Gospel we read of eyewitness testimony: “An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true” (19:35; cf. 21:24). These affirmations of truth are linked with an anonymous character in the text known only as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (13:23; 19:25–27; 20:3–10). There are various opinions about the identity of this Beloved Disciple. In the second century, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon (c. 180–200 CE) provided us with the earliest known comments about the authorship of the Gospels. He wrote:

MATTHEW ALSO ISSUED A WRITTEN GOSPEL AMONG THE HEBREWS IN THEIR OWN DIALECT, WHILE PETER AND PAUL WERE PREACHING AT ROME, AND LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHURCH. AFTER THEIR DEPARTURE, MARK, THE DISCIPLE AND INTERPRETER OF PETER, DID ALSO HAND DOWN TO US IN WRITING WHAT HAD BEEN PREACHED BY PETER. LUKE ALSO, THE COMPANION OF PAUL, RECORDED IN A BOOK THE GOSPEL PREACHED BY HIM. AFTERWARDS, JOHN, THE DISCIPLE OF THE LORD, WHO ALSO HAD LEANED UPON HIS BREST, DID HIMSELF PUBLISH A GOSPEL DURING HIS RESIDENCE AT EPHESUS IN ASIA. (ADV. HAER. 3.1.1).

In this document, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus attributed the last or Fourth Gospel to John, the disciple of the Lord who leaned on his breast (13:23) This *John* was identified with John, the son of Zebedee, who in the Synoptics (i.e. the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke) is one of Jesus’ earliest disciples (Mark 1:19) and close companion (Mark 9:2; 14:33). Many scholars today are not certain that Irenaeus was correct. In the second century, questions were being asked about which Gospels could be considered authentic; linking the Gospel to one of the original disciples may

have been a strategy employed by Irenaeus to bolster its authenticity. While some people still identify him with the son of Zebedee, many scholars today prefer to consider the author as the unidentified eyewitness whose testimony and teaching are the basis for the Gospel’s particular theological vision. Most commentaries will offer further details on this unresolved question.

The actual name of this ancient author seems less important than the affirmations that the Gospel is based on the eyewitness testimony of a disciple, who was with Jesus from the beginning: possibly the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist who first follows Jesus (1:35, 39). He was possibly the leader and teacher of a group of believers, passing on and shaping the memories of Jesus to meet the particular needs and circumstances of this community.

WHERE?

As we read the Gospel, there are indications that this Gospel has gone through a long process of compiling the memories of Jesus, selecting and arranging them, and presenting them in a form to emphasise Jesus’ identity and mission. The Gospel has its roots in the Galilean and Judean life of Jesus. Some of the details about Jewish life, such as the stone jars of water (2:6), and the city of Jerusalem that are found only in this Gospel have been authenticated by archaeologists. While its origins were in the Jewish homeland, its final place of editing is likely to have been somewhere in the wider Greco–Roman world. Irenaeus says it was written in Ephesus, but it could have been written in any one

DID YOU KNOW?

There are a number of 'Johns' described by ancient writings:

- ◆ John, the disciple of the Lord, mentioned by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon (c. 180-200)
- ◆ John the Elder, mentioned by Papias, a bishop of Hierapolis in the 2nd century
- ◆ John of Patmos - the Book of Revelation claims to be written by John on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:18)
- ◆ John, son of Zebedee, the Synoptic Gospels - this John is never mentioned in the Fourth Gospel



LOOKING TO JERUSALEM FROM WITHIN THE CHURCH OF DOMINUS FLEVIT (JESUS WEPT) ON MT OLIVES.

of the larger cities in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, such as Alexandria, Antioch, or Ephesus.

WHO ARE THE JEWS?

In this Gospel, we have many references to characters simply called the Jews. This is very odd, since all the characters in the Gospel are Jews – with the exception of Pilate, possibly the royal official (4:46) and the Greeks who come to see Jesus (12:20). Most often the term is used to refer to the Jewish authorities associated with Jerusalem (e.g. 1:19, 2:13–22; 9:22) who are opponents of Jesus and his disciples (20:19). The term *the Jews* would never be used by a Jewish person to speak of themselves, but would be used by non-Jews, such as Pilate who asks Jesus, “Am I a Jew?” (18:35). Speaking of these characters as *the Jews*, as if everyone else is something different, distances

them for the reader. ‘They’ are not ‘us’! Many scholars today consider that this term is part of the rhetorical strategy of the Gospel, written for a community seeking its own religious identity against emerging Rabbinic Judaism.