

John's Gospel

—A Unique Perspective—

“I, John, am your brother and your partner in suffering and in God’s Kingdom and in the patient endurance to which Jesus calls us. I was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching the word of God and for my testimony about Jesus.”

***—Revelation 1:9,
New Living
Translation***

OF THE FOUR GOSPEL

accounts in the New Testament, the Apostle John’s record is quite unique when compared to those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. John’s distinctive account of Jesus’ life and ministry, and how it should relate to the followers of the Master throughout the Christian era, comes into focus as we examine certain things about his writings. His style and approach to Jesus’ life was different, but most importantly he had a much different perspective, which,

as we will note, had likely evolved over a long period of time.

Matthew and Mark wrote in a synoptic style. That is, they provided a general summary, or synopsis,

of Jesus' life and ministry. Their words seemed to be especially directed towards Jewish and Gentile audiences who were closely associated with Jerusalem. Luke likewise wrote in a synoptic style, though sometimes less precise than Matthew or Mark. Luke's audience was primarily a Greek one, but most likely covered a wide expanse of readership, particularly because of his extensive travels with the Apostle Paul.

In John's Gospel, however, we do not see a synoptic style. Rather, John principally focuses on a variety of specific experiences in Jesus' life, and goes into great detail about them. Often, these details, or the entire event, were not recorded by any of the other three Gospel writers. Thus, they are unique to John's Gospel. His different style of writing, and method of recording Jesus' experiences, was not due to any conflict between what he had witnessed compared to the other Gospel writers. After all, he was there with Jesus from the beginning, as was Matthew. They were both chosen as apostles by Jesus, and were eyewitnesses of his entire ministry.—Matt. 10:2-4

MARK AND LUKE—NOT APOSTLES

Mark, also known as John Mark and Marcus, was not one of the twelve apostles, and probably was not a disciple of Jesus during his ministry. He is first mentioned in Acts 12:12 as being the son of Mary, whose house Peter went to after his miraculous release from prison. (vss. 1-19) It is presumed by some Bible historians that Mark was a young man at this time, and became a follower of Jesus because of the impact upon him of Peter's miraculous

deliverance. So positive was the effect of Peter's experience upon Mark that a short time later he was chosen, along with Barnabas, to accompany Paul on his first missionary tour. (vs. 25) Later, when writing his first epistle, Peter reflects on the special bond he had with Mark, calling him, "my son." (I Pet. 5:13) From these records, therefore, it may be reasonable to suppose that Mark received much of the information for his Gospel account from Peter, who, like Matthew and John, had witnessed firsthand the ministry of Jesus.

Luke, also called Lucas in Philemon 1:24, was likewise not one of the twelve apostles. He may have received much information for his Gospel account from the Apostle Paul. Paul, of course, was not a disciple of Jesus during his earthly ministry, and, in fact, became a devout persecutor of Christians. However, after his conversion he was given many revelations concerning the ministry of Jesus, and could have easily passed much of this information on to Luke.—II Cor. 12:1-7; Gal. 1:11,12

Several other circumstances also lend themselves to the thought that Luke received a majority of his material for the Gospel which bears his name from Paul. First, by comparing Luke 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1-3, it is evident that Luke was the author of both books. Second, as the writer of the Book of Acts, and in humility, Luke never mentions his own name. Third, beginning with chapter 16, shortly after the start of Paul's second missionary tour, and throughout much of the remainder of Acts, Luke uses the plural pronoun "we" when describing the experiences which Paul, and others who were traveling with him, encountered as they journeyed from place to

place. By using the word “we” on so many occasions, it is evident that the author, Luke, was with Paul for a long period of time. Luke was also a physician, and may have attended to certain of Paul’s physical needs as they traveled together. In Colossians 4:14, Paul calls Luke “the beloved physician.” Finally, in his second letter to Timothy, Paul’s last epistle, he says, “Luke is with me.” Written from prison in Rome shortly before his death, Paul’s words confirm the close bond he felt toward Luke, a loving and invaluable companion over a period of many years.—II Tim. 4:11

WHEN WRITTEN

From the foregoing we understand that all four Gospel writers had access to much of the same information, whether by firsthand knowledge such as with Matthew and John, or, in the case of Mark and Luke, having had this imparted to them by others of the apostles. We believe, too, that their writings were each guided by the power and influence of God’s Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we see that John’s record stands out in many ways as different from the other three Gospels. One of the key reasons for this, we believe, is with regard to the approximate times that the four Gospels were written.

Opinions as to when the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written vary among Bible historians. However, a reasonable suggestion which has historical merit is that these three were all written no later than the mid-AD 60s. The great Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire began in AD 66, and culminated in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The Gospels of Matthew,

Mark and Luke go into substantial detail concerning Jesus' prediction of Jerusalem's fall and the Temple's destruction, yet none of the three accounts refer to those events as having already taken place at the time of their writing. Therefore, we have reasonable evidence to conclude that Matthew, Mark and Luke were written prior to the start of these tumultuous events. Though they each recorded Jesus' prophetic words concerning these things, the events themselves had not yet taken place.

While the three synoptic Gospels appear to have been written sometime prior to the mid-AD 60s it is generally held that John wrote his Gospel account significantly later. We may reason upon this in several ways. We know that John also wrote the Book of Revelation, and in our opening text he states that he was on the Island of Patmos when he saw that vision and wrote it down. Many New Testament as well as secular historians maintain that John was exiled to Patmos by authority of the Roman emperor Domitian near the end of the first century, perhaps between AD 90 and AD 95. This means that the Book of Revelation would have been written sometime subsequent to that. If John wrote his Gospel account in conjunction with recording the vision of Revelation, either shortly before or after, that would have placed it much later than the writings of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In another line of reasoning, we recall that when Jesus was on the cross, he gave John responsibility over his mother Mary. (John 19:25-27) We do not know how long Mary lived after Jesus' death, but it could have been upwards of 25-30 years, which would have taken up much of John's life until the

mid-AD 60s, thus possibly delaying the writing of his Gospel to a later date.

In a third line of thinking about the dating of John's Gospel record, numerous historians claim that John served as an elder in the church at Ephesus for a substantial period of time, and in fact, was still serving in that capacity when he was exiled to Patmos. With some interest, we note that in the listing of the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 1:11, each of which John was instructed to send a specific message, Ephesus is the first city mentioned, from which the other six cities were no more than eighty miles away. If, indeed, John had been an elder at Ephesus prior to his exile on the island of Patmos, he would most likely have been familiar with all seven cities to which he was instructed to write. There is no Scripture which states that John was an elder at Ephesus. If true, however, this may have also pushed to a later date his Gospel account.

Because of certain parallels in style, and even some similar wording in certain verses of both writings, the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John were probably written in close proximity time-wise (compare John 21:24; Rev. 1:1,2; and 22:18). Thus, most authorities place the writing of John's Gospel sometime between AD 90 and AD 100, and that he wrote it either from Ephesus, shortly before his exile, or from Patmos, shortly thereafter.

There is, admittedly, a certain degree of speculation in the above analysis, and not all Bible historians agree in their conclusions. Yet, certain critical points seem to have clarity. John's Gospel was likely written some period of time after Jerusalem and the Jewish

Temple were destroyed, and significantly later than the other three Gospels. John's Gospel does not contain any reference to Jesus' prediction about Jerusalem or the Temple's coming fate, which supports the conclusion that these events were a matter of history by the time John wrote. He thus would have seen no need to mention Jesus' prophetic words of doom and desolation upon Israel, since it had already come to pass. John also did not write of Jesus' scathing condemnation of the Jews' religious leaders as the other three writers had done. Those leaders, likewise, would have long since been off the scene. As Jesus had promised, Israel's house was now desolate, and John knew the sad reality of those words.

UNIQUE FEATURES

One of the unique features of John's Gospel is that it makes no mention of Jesus' institution of the Memorial Supper celebration, though Matthew, Mark and Luke all discuss it in detail. This may seem surprising, given the importance of that event. By comparing all four Gospel accounts, the Memorial institution, though not mentioned by John, would properly fit within the thirteenth chapter of his Gospel record. As we consider why John made no mention of this, it perhaps relates to his much later writing.

John, along with the other apostles, was with Jesus in the upper room at the time of the Memorial Supper, and thus would have known firsthand the details of its establishment. He most likely knew also the detailed accounts which Matthew, Mark and Luke had recorded many years earlier, as well as the instructions Paul had "received from the

Lord,” as recorded in I Corinthians 11:23-28. By the time John wrote his Gospel, the brethren had been keeping the Memorial celebration for some sixty years. He perhaps did not see a need to repeat the instructions a fifth time, and thus left those details out of his written account.

Though John did not record the Memorial Supper institution, he did include an important sermon Jesus gave concerning his “flesh” and his “blood,” found in John 6:26-65, which was not included by any of the other Gospel writers. In this important account, Jesus spoke concerning the “bread of life,” and the requirement of his followers to eat his flesh and drink his blood. He explained also that the meaning of this was not to be understood literally, but that to eat and drink of him means to “live by” him, and the “words” that he spoke are to be eaten and appropriated. His literal flesh, Jesus said, “profiteth nothing.”—vss. 57,63

By recording Jesus’ discourse on this subject, John provided the essence of what it really means, in daily practice, to “eat” of Jesus’ flesh and “drink” of his blood. The apostle does this rather than focus on the specific instructions already recorded by numerous other writers. Thus, we see that John’s perspective on the subject of the Memorial Supper was from a daily, spiritual application of its principles, rather than the specifics of its annual observance. Perhaps, from his vantage point some six decades later, John saw that the Memorial celebration had turned into something of a ritual and he, therefore, wanted to place greater emphasis on the spiritual lessons involved. These important words of Jesus would have been missing from the Gospel

record if not for John and his later perspective on the matter, as guided by the Holy Spirit.

We see a similar difference in how John approaches the subject of the Holy Spirit, compared to the other Gospel writers, and to Luke's historical record in the Book of Acts concerning the Day of Pentecost. Much of Matthew, Mark and Luke's focus on the Holy Spirit was as a miracle-working power, which was manifest in outward ways and by special gifts. This emphasis was very understandable during the early years of the Christian church, in order to show with clarity that this was God's doing, and not man's.

John's focus on the Holy Spirit, however, was much more personal. In his Gospel, John quotes certain statements of Jesus in which he speaks of: worshipping the Father "in Spirit and in truth;" the Spirit that quickens us; the "Spirit of truth;" and the Holy Spirit as a "comforter" or helper. (John 4:23; 6:63; 14:17,26) In his first epistle also, John writes how God abides in us by his Spirit. He additionally identifies the Holy Spirit as an "unction," or anointing, from God, and that we know this, not by having miracle-working powers, but by inward development. (I John 3:24; 2:20) None of the other Gospel writers speak about the Holy Spirit in these deeply personal ways.

INWARD WORK

The above examples of John's unique perspective should not be understood to be in any way critical of the other Gospel writers. By the time John wrote, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the miracles of healing, and speaking in foreign tongues, had likely come to an end, having served the divine purpose. However, the inward work of the Christian would continue,

and become increasingly more important, as the Gospel Age moved forward.

It is this greater spiritual focus which, more than anything else, makes John's Gospel so unique. He was the last living apostle. The Jewish people had been scattered, and Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. Rome was beginning to exert greater influence over Christianity, and John no doubt saw much trouble for the true church on the horizon. Although Christianity was well established by this time, John saw serious challenges which lay ahead. When given the vision of Revelation, though he did not understand it to a large degree, John must have concluded that there was much yet to happen before Christ's kingdom would be established, and the throne of David restored.

LONG-TERM LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH

John's viewpoint can perhaps be best spoken of as being for the spiritual "long-term" benefit of the church, down to our very day. As he looked at what Matthew, Mark and Luke had recorded some thirty to forty years earlier, and prayerfully considered what now seemed to be some very important spiritually-focused lessons from Jesus' ministry, he put them down in writing. Thus, the church throughout the Gospel Age has been greatly blessed with lessons for their eternal benefit.

Referring again to the events in the upper room on the night before Jesus died, although John did not write concerning the Memorial Supper institution, we recall those things he alone recorded which are of great importance to the Christian. He recounted the lesson of Jesus' washing the disciples'

feet, and the giving of the great commandment to love one another. (John 13:3-17,31-35) These vital lessons were given by Jesus to his disciples the same evening as the Memorial Supper. John then recorded perhaps the most beautiful, as well as important, discourse and prayer given by Jesus during the entirety of his earthly ministry, which we find in John chapters 14-17. In each of these cases, John's Gospel provides the only scriptural record.

Thus we see that John, through the overruling guidance of God's Holy Spirit, saw the need and importance of making known certain critical facets of the divine arrangement which had not been previously recorded. Many of these, in particular, had to do with the development of the church throughout the many centuries of the Gospel Age, including our day. How thankful we are for this!

Let us appreciate the work of all the writers of the Scriptures, those who "spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (II Pet. 1:21) May we also especially treasure that which the Apostle John has given us. His unique perspective, recorded some thirty years after the records of the other Gospel writers, and some sixty years following Jesus' death and resurrection, has been vital to all of God's consecrated people. From the ending days of the Early Church, through the depths of the Dark Ages, to the increased light of the Harvest, and to the present moment, John's words have been of inestimable value to God's people. Let us be faithful to them, and to all of the inspired writing of the Scriptures, the Word of God, that we might be made "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."—II Tim. 3:15 ■