

INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

by

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Note: Author's introduction in *The Gospel of John, An Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1917). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

The Fourth Gospel is the most familiar and the best loved book in the Bible. It is probably the most important document in all the literature of the world. It has induced more persons to follow Christ, it has inspired more believers to loyal service, it has presented to scholars more difficult problems than any other book that could be named.

The peculiar character of the book has been set forth by the single adjective "sublime"; for sublimity is said to result from the two factors of simplicity and profundity. The sea is sublime because of its unbroken expanse and its measureless depths, and the cloudless sky is sublime because of its limitless vaults of blue. Such, too, is this little book. Its stories are so simple that even a child will love them; but its statements are so profound that no philosopher can fathom them.

The author, almost beyond question, was John--who was among the first followers of Christ, belonged to the inner circle of the apostles, stood at the cross, received to his home the mother of our Lord, was the first to believe his resurrection, and lingered last, looking for his Master's return. He never names himself in the narrative but assumes the title of "the disciple whom Jesus loved," suggesting how the love of Christ inspired and transfigured him. Surely such a person was best prepared to write of the nature and life of Christ. For centuries the symbol of the Gospel has been the "eagle," the bird which is said to soar highest and to gaze with unveiled eye upon the dazzling brightness of the sun.

The purpose of the author is indicated in the opening eighteen verses, commonly called the Prologue, and is definitely stated in the closing sentences of the twentieth chapter: "That ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." He wishes therefore to prove that Jesus is the "Messiah" who came in fulfillment of all the Old Testament types and prophecies, and further that he is a divine Being and is in this unique sense "the Son of God."

The ultimate purpose, however, is to inspire in his readers such faith in Christ as will result in that eternal life which Christ alone can give. In order to effect his purpose, John produces a number of witnesses, which have been variously classified, and include the testimony of the Father, of the Holy Spirit, of the Scriptures, of John the Baptist, of the disciples, of various individuals such as Nicodemus, the woman of Samaria, Pilate, Caiaphas. But above all, John depends upon the testimony of the words and works of Jesus. If he was not "the Christ, the Son of God," then his claims were those of a deceiver. If he did not work miracles, he surely pretended to and was then an impostor. Of these miracles John makes a careful selection of only seven or eight; and it is in

reference to these "signs" of divine power that John declares, "these are written that ye may believe."

The method of John in presenting his proof is not that of a logical treatise or philosophical argument. He has rather presented a drama. The life of Christ, which is the substance of his Gospel, is written with the fascination of a play; but as each actor steps upon the scene some new testimony is borne to the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And as the testimony is produced, and as Christ makes his claims and works his miracles, we see the developing faith of his followers and the deepening hatred of his enemies.

There are two great parts to the dramatic action. The first closes with the twelfth chapter. The last great miracle has been wrought--Lazarus has been raised from the dead--and now the rulers conspire to put Jesus to death. But Mary appears pouring out upon the feet of her Lord her priceless gift of love, and the multitudes greet him with hosannas, and even the Greeks are eager to see him. In the second part of the book Christ has withdrawn from the world and is revealing himself to his disciples--first in an act of humble service, then in words of comfort and cheer, then in a prayer which none but the Son of God could have uttered, and supremely in his triumph over pain and suffering and death. When at last the doubting Thomas stands before his risen Master and cries out "My Lord and my God," the demonstration is complete. There is no reason why all readers should not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Yet the purpose of John is intensely practical. He not only wishes to inspire faith but to show the life in which faith will issue. This is the significance of the miracles which he relates. They are indeed "signs" of divine power, but they are also symbols of the life which Christ imparts. The first was wrought in a home at a wedding feast, to suggest the joy of the Christian life and the transforming power of Christ. The second shows how Christ can deliver from fear and anxiety, as he restores hope and peace to a parent's heart. Then he heals a cripple, to indicate his ability to give power to the helpless. He feeds the five thousand, to reveal himself as the real Food for the soul. He stills the storm, and men learn what he can be to them in all times of stress and places of peril. He opens the eyes of one born blind, and teaches us that he alone can take away "the dimness of our souls." He raises Lazarus, and we understand his claim to be "the resurrection and the life." He rises victorious over death and the grave, and we no longer doubt that he is divine but cry out adoringly, "Our Lord and our God."

It only remained for John to write that charming Epilogue which forms the last chapter of his Gospel, where we see that a divine Lord is also an unseen, present, guiding, sustaining Lord; and where we find that faith will issue in lives of service and love and patient suffering as we wait for our Lord to reappear in visible glory.

[Return to the Introductions to the Gospels and Acts](#)