An Intro to the Book of John

Abstract

This provides a brief intro to the book of John, the fourth gospel book found in the New Testament. We also provide some perspectives on Jesus from a few different sources, including the popular science fiction author Douglas Adams. Further information about the book of John can be found online or in footnotes and chapter notes of a study Bible (I use the NIV Study Bible). A recommended text on evidence for the authenticity of the New Testament manuscripts and their portrayal of Jesus, written from the perspective of a modern times journalist, is *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel.

I. INTRODUCTION TO JOHN

The book of John is the fourth book of the New Testament.\(^1\) It is one of the four “gospel books” (books of the New Testament written about the life of Jesus). The author was John the Disciple, who was probably the youngest of the 12 disciples of Jesus. John may have been a teenager when Jesus was killed on the cross (approximately the year 30 A.D.). However, he likely wrote the book many years later, when he was an elder of the Christian church that had formed. As the author, John uses the phrase “the disciple whom Jesus loved” to refer to himself (he does not mention himself by name in the book).\(^2\)

A. On Non-Traditional Conjectures of Authorship

Because John does not state his own name or claim authorship directly in the book, some people have suggested that the book might have been written by someone else, possibly a “John the Elder” (due to a letter by an early member of the Christian church that ascribes the gospel to “John the Elder,” not “John the Disciple”). However, it is reasonable to assume that “John the Disciple” is the same person as “John the Elder.” Further, there is no apparent motivation for the author to replace the name “John” with “the disciple whom Jesus loved” unless the author himself was that disciple. The traditional view is that the book was written by John (the disciple who later became an elder in the church). Documents written in the years 100-200 A.D. show that the early church held this view. The book is also quite similar in style to the letters of *First John*, *Second John*, and *Third John*, also contained as separate books in the New Testament and traditionally attributed to the same author.

B. On Differences From the Other Gospels

There are several differences between this gospel book and the others. First, John has his own perspective as an eye witness to many of the events of the life of Jesus. Second, before describing the life of Jesus, John makes an authoritative theological statement by introducing Jesus as “the Word” of God, who was with God when the world was created. Third, some events of the life of Jesus written in this book are also written in the other three gospels, but in a different order. One explanation is that John was writing about topics thematically rather than chronologically. Another explanation is that the exact ordering of events (such as whether or not Jesus told “Parable A” before “Parable B”) was not a detail that John remembered.

C. On the Jewish Messiah

Jesus was Jewish, as were all his disciples. The Jewish people believed in the prophecy of a “Messiah” or “Christ” who would come from God to save the Jewish people.\(^3\) Many Jewish people at that time believed the Messiah would rescue them from their subjugation to the Roman authorities. The idea of a “Messiah” comes from several Jewish prophecies written in the Old Testament (including the book of Isaiah). The prophecies predict that another messenger would come first to prepare the way for the Messiah of God. The first chapter of the book of John introduces this messenger as John the Baptist (not the same person as John the Disciple). After Jesus died, many Jewish people believed that Jesus was the Messiah (these people started the Christian church), while other Jewish people did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. Today, Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that his life fulfills all of the predictions written about the Messiah in the Old Testament. Some Jewish people today also believe that Jesus is the Messiah (these are Jewish Christians). Many other Jewish people today either are still waiting for the Messiah, or have given up their beliefs in the prophecy of the Messiah.

D. Further Information

Further information about the book of John and other New Testament manuscripts can be found online. An interesting book on the history and authenticity of the New Testament is *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, a former journalist for the newspaper *The Chicago Tribune*.

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1 The New Testament is the second half of the Christian Bible and contains the four gospel books *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*, each describing the events in the life of Jesus. The New Testament also contains summaries of events of the early Christian church (the book of *Acts*) and letters written by the leaders of the early Christian church, including Peter, John, James, and Paul. The first part of the Christian Bible is the Old Testament, and contains the old Jewish books of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy) and writings of other Jewish prophets (such as Isaiah and Jonah).

2 It is clear from the other three gospel books (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that the person that John refers to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” is John himself.

3 The word “Christ” comes from a Greek word meaning “the anointed,” and the word “Messiah” comes from a Hebrew word meaning “anointed one.”
We will find out about Jesus from the perspective of his disciple John. Here are some other perspectives.

A. Perspective from a popular fiction novelist

Here is a perspective on Jesus as written by the comedic popular science fiction writer Douglas Adams (excerpt from The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy):

“And then, one Thursday, nearly two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change, a girl sitting on her own in a small cafe in Rickmansworth suddenly realized what it was that had been going wrong all this time, and she finally knew how the world could be made a good and happy place. This time it was right, it would work, and no one would have to get nailed to anything.

Sadly, however, before she could get to a phone to tell anyone about it, a terrible, stupid catastrophe occurred, and the idea was lost for ever.

This is not her story. But it is the story of that terrible, stupid catastrophe and some of its consequences.”

B. Perspective from the Qur’an

Muslims believe Jesus was a great prophet, a pure human being, and that he was born of a virgin. They also believe he talked as an infant and performed miracles as both an adult and a child (the Christian Bible does not have any account of infant and childhood miracles). Muslims do not believe Jesus was crucified, but that he only appeared to be crucified. These beliefs are based on the writings of Muhammad in the Qur’an (approximately the year 600 A.D.). Muhammad compiled the Qur’an gradually over a period of many years, claiming that he received the words directly from revelations by God. The translations of Qur’anic passages below are from the following webpage: http://www.soundvision.com/Info/Jesus/inIslam.asp

- “She (Mary) said: O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me.’ He (God) said: So (it will be) for God creates what He wills. When He has decreed something, He says to it only: Be!’- and it is” (Quran 3:47).
- “Then she (Mary) pointed to him. They said: How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?’ He (Jesus) said: Verily! I am a slave of God, He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet;” (19:29-30).
- “Then will God say: O Jesus the son of Mary! recount My favor to you and to your mother. Behold! I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit (the angel Gabriel) so that you did speak to the people in childhood and in maturity. Behold! I taught you the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel. And behold: you make out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My leave, and you breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by My leave, and you heal those born blind, and the lepers by My leave. And behold! you bring forth the dead by My leave. And behold! I did restrain the children of Israel from (violence to you) when you did show them the Clear Signs, and the unbelievers among them said: This is nothing but evident magic’ “ (5:110).
- “The Messiah (Jesus), son of Mary, was no more than a Messenger” (Quran 5:75)
- “They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did. (Quran 4:156) God lifted him up to His presence. God is Almighty, All-Wise” (Quran 4:157).

C. Perspective from the Dalai Lama

The following quote by the Dalai Lama is from an interview in Newsweek magazine (Newsweek, March 27, 2000):

“As a Buddhist, my attitude toward Jesus Christ is that he was either a fully enlightened being or a bodhisvatta of a very high spiritual realization.”

D. Perspective from the Old Testament book of Isaiah

The Jewish prophecies of the Messiah paint a seemingly paradoxical picture of the Messiah both as a great king and a suffering servant. The following two passages from the book of Isaiah are traditionally viewed as part of the Jewish Messianic prophecies. Today, many Jewish people believe the Isaiah 53 passage is not talking about the Messiah, but about the nation of Israel. Christians believe both passages are talking about Jesus.

As a great king: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” (Isaiah 9:6-7).

As a suffering servant: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:3-6)