

St. John's Gospel: the Theological and Spiritual Gospel

By Steve Ray

Eagles soar high above the surface of the earth. Their eyes survey the farthest reaches of the horizon — the connection of heaven to earth is in perspective from their lofty vantage point. From our earthbound perspective, the eagle is *suspended* between heaven and earth. It is difficult for us to see the connection physically. That is why artists have often painted St. John the Evangelist, writing with an eagle at his side. Mystic, philosopher, disciple, one of the Twelve, bishop, “beloved of the Lord”; St. John wrote the fourth gospel, which soars to the heavens and gives perspective to the earthbound.

The *Gospel of St. John*—the last of the gospels to be written—contains the theology and spiritual insights of a man filled with the Holy Spirit; a man who, during his younger years, actually knew Jesus personally. Jesus had promised him that He would remind John of all that He had taught him, and through the Holy Spirit lead him into all truth. After seventy years of contemplation, the aged Apostle took up his pen, to write the life of Christ and reveal the deepest spiritual realities.

John penned his masterpiece between AD 90–100. St. Irenaeus (c. 120–c. 200) writes, “The Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles” (Endnote 1). Emperor Trajan reigned in Rome from AD 98–117. Irenaeus also writes, “John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia” (Endnote 2) Tradition also informs us that the Blessed Virgin stayed with John in Ephesus (see Jn 19:26).

Internal evidence demonstrates that John wrote the gospel bearing his name; however, it is Catholic history and the unanimous consent of apostolic tradition that provide the clear certainty as to his authorship (see CCC 120). Eusebius, writing around AD 300, quoting ancient sources said, “When Mark and Luke had already published their Gospels, they say that John, who had employed all his time in proclaiming the Gospel orally, finally proceeded to write for the following reason. The three Gospels already mentioned having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness; but that there was lacking in them an account of the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry. . . . the apostle John, being asked to do it for this reason, gave in his Gospel an account of the period which had been omitted by the earlier evangelists” (Endnote 3).

Most New Testament books are written to a specific audience, but John addresses no one in particular. He doesn't limit his gospel. He pulls back the curtain on eternity and addresses the whole world—Jew, Gentile and all subsequent peoples. His is truly a cosmic, universal gospel.

Yet, his purpose and message are simple and straightforward. After an important example—“Doubting Thomas”—declares that Jesus is both *Lord* and *God* (Jn 20:28), John explains his reason for writing: “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in

the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

John’s account of Jesus’ life is riveting. However, there is much more than just the “surface” story. John has embedded deep spiritual treasures in his gospel. Clement of Alexandria (c. 155–c. 220) wrote that “last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel (Endnote 4), being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.”

Beneath the surface, within the simplicity of John’s text, the Spirit of God has woven a tapestry of unfathomable beauty and depth. Key themes include truth versus lies, witnesses and testimony, time and eternity, human and divine, darkness and light, water, bread, life and mystery—the universe, and existence before the universe began. John transports us into the very heart of God, into the inner life of the Trinity itself.

This marvelous composition is much like a symphony: the “Magnum Opus” of the master theologian and mystic. The simplest of folks enjoy the music but the greatest of connoisseurs can never fully plumb the depths.

It begins with an “Overture” (Jn 1:1–18) which introduces all the “musical themes” in nascent form. Those themes are then developed two proceeding “movements”—each replete with controversy, sublime revelations and intertwining themes.

The First Movement is “The Book of Signs,” where John presents seven “miracles” that point as signs to the mystery of Christ. He is more than just a man—He is the “I AM” of the Jews (Ex 3:14), the creator of the universe, the God of Israel. His works are signs to understand His identity, an identity which was denied by “His own”, especially the leaders of Israel (Jn 1:11). “The Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This is the mystery of the Incarnation—the invisible God clothing Himself with flesh and dwelling among men. Whereas the other gospels give a human genealogy, John starts with Jesus’ eternal existence.

Throughout this “Book of Signs,” Jesus is presented as the *New Moses*. He crosses the water, ascends the mountain, and descends with miraculous bread in the wilderness (Jn 6)—just as Moses crossed the Red Sea, ascended Mount Sinai, and provided manna in the wilderness. Jesus is *the* Prophet to come (Deut 18:15, 18; Jn 6:14). He is also the *New King David*, born in Bethlehem, the Good Shepherd (Jn 10) who is anointed as king and enters Jerusalem as prophesied by Zechariah 9:9: “Behold, your King is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt” (Jn 12). Jesus is the *New High Priest* who stands at the Temple before His sacrifice. He prays His high priestly prayer for His own consecration, then that of His disciples, and finally for the Church—those who believe through the Apostles’ word (Jn 17). Prophet, Priest, and King—Jesus fills the sacred offices of Israel. He is the Son of Man who comes in the clouds and is given a kingdom by the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:13–14; Jn 6:53, 62).

The second movement of the Symphony is “*The Book of the Passion*” in which the Incarnate Son of God and Son of Man is lifted up: first in the Crucifixion, then in the Resurrection—the supreme sign. John, like no other takes us deep into the agony and ecstasy of this Passion on which hangs the whole of time and the destiny of man and the created universe.

Such is the master composition of St. John. It is a symphony to be enjoyed and relished over and over again. This timeless and unfathomable gospel is a gift to be treasured, studied, and lived “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”

Bookending in John’s Gospel: His Perspective of an Eagle

Notice how the Primacy of Peter begins and ends the Gospel (Jn 1:42; 21:15–17), as John recalls his appointment as the Rock and Shepherd of Jesus’ flock. John “frames to emphasize” many important themes by pointing out the historical symmetry his eagle-like sense of perspective showed him.

Mary, the “woman” of Genesis 3:15, is at the first and last breath of Jesus’ earthly ministry (Jn 2:1–1; 19:26): emphasizing her profound cooperation in His work of redemption.

Cleansing water is also at the beginning and end, with the waters of purification contained in stone jars for the Jew alone, contrasted with the water and blood flowing *uncontained* from the side of Christ, a vessel of flesh (cf. Ezek 36:25–27) bringing cleansing and new birth *to the whole world*.

As the first Adam was put to sleep and his bride was taken from his side in the first creation, so Christ “slept” on Calvary while his side was cut open and the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist poured from His side giving birth to His bride — the Church. Is it surprising that, at the moment, Mary the Mother of the Church, was there at the foot of the cross, the first witness with John to the eternal fountain?

Endnotes:

1. Eusebius, *History of the Church* 6, 14, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 1:261.
2. *Against Heresies* 3, 1, 1 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James [Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1985], 1:414.
3. *History of the Church* 3, 24 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, trans. Schaff, Philip and Wace, Henry [Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1982], 1:153.
4. Written by Mark in Rome.