

About St. John

Knowledge of the life of St. John of Patmos (also known as the 'Theologian' or the 'Divine'), the author of the Book of Revelation, which includes the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, mostly comes from apocryphal stories recorded after his death. Christian tradition identifies him with Other New Testament figures of the same name, St. John the Evangelist, the traditional author of the Fourth Gospel who is also claimed to be St. John the Apostle. The accounts of the Gospels agree that the latter is the son of Zebedee; together with his brother James (the Greater), he decided to follow Christ while fishing in the lake Galilee. He became one of Christ's closest disciples and is said to have been with him on various significant occasions such as the Transfiguration and the Crucifixion. According to the Fourth Gospel, also known as the Gospel of John (In 19:26-27), on the cross: When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, Woman, behold, your son. ' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother. ' And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. The disciple whom he loved is thought to have been St. John. He is said to have been martyred like his brother St. James and buried in Jerusalem. Another tradition holds that taking the Virgin with him, St. John traveled to Ephesus in Asia Minor, was exiled to the island of Patmos, wrote the Fourth Gospel and the Book of Revelation there and finally returned to Ephesus where he died and was buried. The second half of the first century was full of disasters for the early Christians. The Romans at first regarded Christianity as a new Jewish movement. Like the others it was expected to disappear or survive as a sect after the crucifixion of Christ. When this did not happen and Christians began to challenge (probably not in quantity but in essence) the accepted doctrine of the Synagogue and Rome, its leaders were caught and eliminated. St. Stephen and St. James the less (the traditional brother of Christ) were stoned to death and St. James the Greater put to the sword. St. Peter and St. Paul were taken to Rome and executed. Many believers had to leave Palestine and seek shelter in other countries. It is during this period, probably during the Jewish Revolt (66-70) which ended with the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem that St. John, taking the Virgin with him, traveled to Ephesus. At that time Ephesus probably had a population of over hundred and fifty thousand, which must have included a large number of Jews, and about a thousand or more Jewish and Gentile Christians. Following the Jewish Re-volt, Jews and Jewish Christians of the diaspora began to lose their favorable position in Roman eyes and fall into disgrace. To the discontent of the Jews, the Gentile Christians, since they had not participated in the revolt, were treated better. However by this time the solid Christian communities established during the first missionary wave had been weakened by dissensions and declining numbers. On arriving in Ephesus, St. John was shocked to see how some Christians had compromised with pagan practices, a situation which he refers to in his first letter of the Revelation. This is addressed to the Christians in Ephesus. The first part of the major ancient source which is thought to have narrated the arrival and first stay of St. John in Ephesus is lost. What survives relates mostly to his return from Patmos exile; how he began proclaiming the Gospel in Ephesus, his contests with both pagans and heretics among his own community, his miracles and his death there. In the Book of Revelation St. John does not give any detailed information about the cause of his exile. He merely says that he was exiled to Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Christ (Rv1 :9). Preaching was not a capital crime which would lead to banishment. As long as they did not cause disturbances the Roman administration allowed the people under their rule to worship whatever god or cult they chose. Christians were not regarded as criminals in Roman eyes but members of an illicit religion. When he was serving as the governor of the province of Bithynia, the younger Pliny wrote to Trajan asking the emperor's advice on what to do with the Christians whose numbers kept on increasing. The governor admitted that although he executed Christians as his predecessors had done, he did not know the exact nature of their crime. Pliny's letter is the first documented account of Christian presence in Anatolia. Trajan, although in the course of time he changed his opinion, did not regard the Christians as dangerous. In Ephesus it is probable that St. John was accused of being an agitator. Being the most prominent figure of his group he might have been chosen to serve as an example. The worst punishment reserved for criminals not sentenced to death, was to strip them of their civil rights and material possessions and banish them to a remote corner of the empire or to an isolated spot. If St. John had been accused of refusing to sacrifice to the imperial cult, especially the cult of Domitian (81-96) which was then established in Ephesus, this would have been a capital crime punishable by death. The huge edifice to the south of the state agora in Ephesus was the first temple of the imperial cult erected in Anatolia and its impact must have been on the Christians in this city. A late Greek tradition has it that after arriving in Ephesus the story of St. John's miracles reached the ears of Domitian and he was called to Rome. Here his power was tested in front of the emperor by making him drink a cup of poison which killed a criminal but did not harm him, and by asking him to raise a girl who had supposedly been slain by an evil spirit. Domitian, impressed by what he had witnessed, decided only to banish him to Patmos. His banishment lasted until the death of the emperor. A tradition popular only among Latin authors, relates that St. John was first taken to Rome as prisoner upon the order of the emperor and cast into a cauldron of hot oil at the Latin Gate (the origin of the feast of St. John 'Port Latin' or at the 'Latin Gate,' May 6), but he came out unscathed. The place chosen to banish St. John was one of the volcanic islands scattered in the Aegean about eighty kilometers south of Ephesus, and was used as a penal colony. A later Byzantine chronicle refers to the island as being 'deserted and uncultivated, covered with and made impassable by thorns and shrubs, and by reason of its aridity completely barren', St. John was exiled to Patmos together with his young disciple Prochorus, one of the deacons of the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:5). On the way to Patmos he rescued a boy who fell from the ship into the sea. The length of his exile is claimed to have been one and half, or five or fifteen years. During his stay there he did not stop preaching the Gospel and converting the inhabitants. A tradition has it that when his activity was heard at the Temple of Apollo, the priests asked help from a famous magician called Kynops whose most popular trick was to jump into the sea and come out after a while, unharmed. In front of the witnesses challenging St. John, he did the same. St. John extended his arms in the form of a cross and prayed 'O Thou, who didst grant to Moses by this similitude to

over-throw the Amalek, O Lord Jesus Christ, bring down Kynops to the deep of the sea; let him never more behold this sun, nor converse with living men', After a short while the petrified body of the magician surfaced as a rock on the water a short distance away. The local fishermen claim that to this day the bad taste of the shellfish caught around their rock derives from this magician. On Patmos St. John was unchained and free to go wherever he wished. It was in a grotto on Patmos that he wrote the Fourth Gospel and received the visions of the last book of the New Testament known as the Book of Revelation. Some of the imagery, for instance: Then the sky was divided like a torn scroll curling up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place

(Rv 6:14)

or

Every island fled, and mountains disappeared

(Rv 16:20) is thought to have been inspired by the island. The Book of Revelation gives few facts about St. John's life, except for the fact that he had a Jewish background and probably a priestly ancestry. So far as is known, he remained celibate. In art he is often shown as an old man on Patmos, seated and writing his book, standing or sitting in front of a cave and looking up into heaven, and writing or dictating to his disciple Prochorus. Sometimes he is shown sitting alone writing the Fourth Gospel. In such representations the inscription on the Gospel or open scroll in his hand or in front of his disciple Prochorus reads In the beginning was the Word (In 1 : 1). His attribute is an eagle, because his words carry the reader up to heaven and paper, ink, and a scroll are the common accessories of such compositions. St. John's Patmos exile terminated with Domitian's death. However, his ship was wrecked on leaving Patmos and swimming on a cork St. John landed at Miletos; from there he went to Ephesus. Afterwards he is said to have governed the churches in Asia and given advice to their elders until his death in the reign of Trajan (98-117). The apocryphal tradition mentions that one day while preaching in the Temple of Artemis the altar and other objects in the temple and half of the temple itself, collapsed. Once he was challenged by Aristodemus, high priest of the Temple of Artemis, the Roman Diana, to show the superiority of the Christians' God by drinking out of a poisoned cup. When St. John made the sign of cross over the cup, the poison emerged in the shape of a serpent, and he drained the vessel. St. John also restored to life two criminals under sentence of death who had been made to test beforehand the result of the poison. Having witnessed the miracle both Aristodemus and the procon-sul of Ephesus are said to have accepted Christian faith. Among the other miracles he is said to have performed in Ephesus was the raising of Drusiana, a widow with whom he had lodged before he was exiled to Patmos. As her funeral passed by she sat up in her coffin at St. John's command and went home to prepare a meal for him. During his residence in Ephesus he is claimed to have gone to Smyrna where he won St. Polycarp to Christianity and made him the bishop of the city. Another tradition claims that during his last years St. John built a hut on the isolated Ayasuluk hill and lived there and wrote the fourth book of the New Testament known by his name. He is thought to have died at a great age, claimed to have been a hundred and twenty, around the year 100 and to be buried on the hill. This may be the reason why he is sometimes depicted as a very old man with a long white beard, even when he is in the early years of his life in Palestine. According to tradition, after his tomb was dug, he laid himself down in it and gave up his spirit. The following day his body was not found because presumably he had ascended to heaven. Another tradition claims that only his sandals were found and the earth over his grave was moving as if stirred by his breathing. The Latin tradition has it that after his prayer there appeared over him a great light at which no one could look; then he laid himself down and gave up his ghost. Immediately manna issued from his tomb and continued issuing forth. By the end of the second century most of the churches in western Anatolia regarded him as their founder. About St. John St. John and The Seven Churches Letters to Seven Churches Map of Seven Churches The Book of Revelation The Early Christians The Gospel of St. John