

9.4

## **Distinctive Characteristics of John's Gospel**

**A. John's Gospel begins with a hymnic prologue that presents Jesus as the preexistent Logos made flesh (1:1–18).**

**B. John's Gospel appears to be related in some way to the three Johannine Epistles.**

- It sometimes has been thought that they might have the same author or come from the same community. Tradition has also connected John's Gospel with the book of Revelation, whose author is identified as "John" (Rev. 1:4), but this connection is not widely accepted by scholars today.

**C. John's Gospel claims to be based on the testimony of someone called the "beloved disciple" (19:35; 21:20–24).**

- He leans on Jesus's chest at the Last Supper (13:23) and is entrusted with the care of Jesus's mother (19:26–27). Numerous texts also compare this disciple's experiences with those of Peter (13:24–25; 18:15–16; 20:4, 8; 21:7, 21–23).
- Church tradition often has identified this disciple with John the son of Zebedee.

**D. John's Gospel shows signs of having been edited.**

The story of the woman caught in adultery (7:53–8:11) is missing in some manuscripts and is located at different

places in John's Gospel in others. (In some authorities the story is found in the Gospel of Luke instead of the Gospel of John.)

- Some passages don't make sense in present context:

“You look for an opportunity to kill me” (8:37) (addressed to the Jews who believe in him [8:31])

“Mary was the one who anointed the Lord” (11:2) (but not until 12:3)

- Jesus says, “Rise, let us be on our way” (14:31) (but then he continues talking for two more chapters).
- Chapter 21 appears to be an addition, and 20:30–31 sounds like it was intended to be an ending.
- References to enumerated signs (e.g., 2:11; 4:54) may derive from an earlier source (a “signs” Gospel that could have concluded with 20:30–31).

**E. Ninety percent of the content in John's Gospel is unparalleled, and stories in John that are found elsewhere are told quite differently from the parallels.**

- feeding of five thousand (featuring a boy with bread and fish and the “Bread of Life” speech) (6:1–15)
- anointing at Bethany (by Mary, sister of Martha, rather than by an unnamed woman) (12:1–8)

- crucifixion (with three unparalleled words from the cross)  
(19:17–37)

**F. John appears to know numerous minor details not reported by the other Gospels (especially with regard to the passion narrative).**

- name of slave whose ear was severed: Malchus (18:10)
- name of disciple who struck Malchus: Simon Peter (18:10)
- name of high priest's father-in-law: Annas (18:13)

**G. John's Gospel presents a very different chronology for Jesus's ministry than that of the other Gospels.**

- References to three Passovers indicate Jesus's ministry lasts three years (2:13; 6:4; 11:55).
- Jesus travels back and forth between Galilee and Judea.
- Jesus's ministry overlaps with that of John the Baptist (3:22–24; cf. Matt. 4:12; Mark 1:14).
- Events: temple cleansing occurs at beginning of ministry (2:14–22; cf. Matt. 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–46); miraculous catch of fish occurs after Easter (21:1–11; cf. Luke 5:4–11).
- Jesus's death takes place on the day before the Passover meal (18:28; 19:13–14, 31) rather than on the day after (cf. Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7).

## **H. The content and style of Jesus's teaching in John's Gospel is different from the other Gospels.**

- *Content*: instead of talking about the kingdom of God or the Mosaic law, Jesus talks primarily about himself ("He reveals that he is the Revealer"<sup>1</sup>)
- *Style*: instead of using parables and proverbial aphorisms, Jesus delivers long philosophical discourses (5:19–47; 6:25–70; 7:14–52; 8:12–59; 10:1–18, 22–39; 12:23–36; 14:1–16:33).

## **I. In John's Gospel, the miracles of Jesus are depicted as signs (2:11; 4:54; 6:2, 14; 12:18) that are intended to lead people to believe (20:30).**

- In the other Gospels, signs are associated with false prophets, and Jesus refuses to work them (e.g., Matt. 12:38–39; 16:1–4; 24:24). Even in John, their effectiveness as signs is mixed: some people believe because of the signs (2:23; 6:2, 14; cf. 20:30), while others do not (11:47; 12:37; cf. 4:48).

## **J. Misunderstanding is a common motif in John's Gospel.**

- "this temple" (2:19–22)
- "born from above" (3:3–5)
- "living water" (4:10–15)
- "sleep" (11:11–14)

- See also 4:31–34; 6:32–35, 51–52; 7:33–36; 8:21–22, 31–33, 51–53.

**K. John’s Gospel makes abundant use of symbolism.**

- See, for example, the metaphorical “I am” sayings (6:35, 51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5).
- In some cases, it is not clear whether a matter has symbolic meaning or not (e.g., the untorn net and 153 fish of 21:11).

**L. John’s Gospel identifies Jesus’s opponents as “the Jews,” a term that is not widely used in the other Gospels (only Matt. 28:15 and Mark 7:3).**

- Note also John’s references to people who believe in Jesus being expelled from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2).

**M. John’s Gospel emphasizes love for one another as the single new commandment of Jesus and as the distinctive mark of his followers (13:34–35).**

- Jesus does not reinterpret the law in detail as he does in the other Gospels (e.g., Matt. 5:17–6:18).
- Jesus does not speak of love for neighbors or for enemies as he does in the other Gospels (e.g., Luke 6:27–31; 10:25–37).

**N. John’s Gospel emphasizes the role of the Spirit, the Paraclete.**

- promised by Jesus (7:37–39; 14:16–17)

- given after the resurrection (20:22)
- enables believers to continue Jesus's works (14:12)
- teaches and reveals truth (14:25–26; 16:13)
- In some sense, the coming of the Spirit is a “second coming” of Jesus (14:15–20).

**O. John's Gospel has its own special vocabulary for “salvation.”**

- As in the other Gospels, salvation can be described as entering God's kingdom (3:3–5).
- More often, it is described as:
  - having “life” or “eternal life” (3:14–17, 36; 5:39–40; 10:10; 20:31; cf. 1 John 5:12)
  - knowing “the truth” (8:32; cf. 1:14, 17; 3:21; 5:33; 16:13; 17:17–19; 18:37); compare with John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life”

**P. John's Gospel presents Jesus's crucifixion as his exaltation.**

- Three passages refer to Jesus being “lifted up” (3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34). These references parallel the three “passion predictions” found in each of the other Gospels (Matt. 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; Mark 8:31–32; 9:31; 10:33–34; Luke 9:22, 44; 18:31–33).

1. Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1951, 1955), 2:66.