

Comparison of John and the Synoptic Gospels

John's Gospel obviously differs from the three Synoptic Gospels with regard to content. John tells many stories that the Synoptic Gospels do not tell; conversely, John lacks many well-known stories that the Synoptic Gospels do tell. All told, about 90 percent of the material in John's Gospel is without parallel in the other Gospels. But John also differs from the Synoptic Gospels in other ways.

Chronology

Certain events occur at radically different times: the cleansing of the temple comes at the beginning (2:13–22) rather than at the end (cf. Mark 11:15–19); the miraculous catch of fish comes at the end (21:1–11) rather than at the beginning (cf. Luke 5:4–11). The chronology of Jesus's crucifixion is also slightly different: Jesus is crucified on the day before Passover (18:28; 19:13–14, 31) rather than on the day after he and his disciples eat the Passover meal (cf. Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7). In a broader sense, the mention of three Passovers in this Gospel gives the impression that Jesus's public ministry was conducted over a period of three years (see 2:13; 6:4; 11:55); the other Gospels give no indication of how long Jesus's ministry lasted, but apart from the information in John, we probably would have surmised that it was a much shorter time, probably less than a year. Furthermore, in John's Gospel, Jesus's ministry

overlaps with that of John the Baptist (3:22–24), which is not the impression that we would have received from the other Gospels (cf. Matt. 4:12–17; Mark 1:14).

Geography

The focus of John’s Gospel is different geographically from that of the other Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, the adult Jesus confines himself mostly to Galilee and surrounding territories, until he embarks on one fateful journey to Jerusalem, where he is crucified. John’s Gospel narrates a largely Judean ministry: Jesus visits Jerusalem twice before the end of chapter 7, and chapters 8–20 are all set in Judea.

The Style of Jesus’s Teaching

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’s teaching is marked by parables, proverbs, beatitudes, and other short, pithy sayings. In John’s Gospel, Jesus delivers long, philosophical discourses (5:19–47; 6:25–70; 7:14–52; 8:12–59; 10:1–18, 22–39; 12:23–46; 14:1–16:33). These speeches, furthermore, do not consist of numerous individual passages that could have circulated independently; rather, they tend to focus on single themes that are developed at length.

The Focus of Jesus’s Teaching

The Synoptic Gospels summarize the content of Jesus’s proclamation as “the good news of the kingdom of God” (see, e.g.,

Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:14–15), and indeed most of his teaching in those Gospels seems to be about the nature of God’s kingdom and the life expected of those who enter God’s kingdom. In John, Jesus talks mostly about himself: he talks about his identity as the one who comes to reveal the Father and about what it means for people to believe in him, love him, obey him, and abide in him. Far from seeking to keep his identity or status a secret (cf. Mark 1:23–25, 34, 43–44; 3:11–12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26, 30; 9:9), he openly announces who he is (4:26; 5:18; 6:35–51; 8:12–30; cf. 7:1–29) and reflects at length on the significance of being in a relationship with him (and with God through him).

Literary Features

John’s Gospel is also different from the Synoptics in basic linguistic ways. It is written in a style of Greek that retains Semitic syntax, probably reflecting the Palestinian roots of the apostles and early Christian missionaries (as opposed to the less Semitic Greek employed by Diaspora Jews). John also displays a strong tendency to use dualistic categories, such as “above and below” (3:31; 8:23), “light and darkness” (1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46), “truth and lies” (8:44–45). Overall, the language of John’s Gospel (and of Jesus in that Gospel) has been described as rhythmic, poetic, mystical, philosophical, and mysterious. Two related features contribute to this impression: (1) John’s Gospel is heavily *symbolic*, using metaphors to describe Jesus in terms that are never absolutely defined (see,

e.g., 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 15:1); and (2) John's Gospel employs the literary device of *misunderstanding*, whereby characters in the story misconstrue something that Jesus says (e.g., 2:19–22; 3:3–5; 11:12–14) and the narrator or Jesus himself needs to clarify the matter (unless the correct meaning is assumed to be obvious).