

Introducing Jesus

Study 6: John’s Picture of Jesus

John as a Unique Gospel

There is no question that John’s writing is a Gospel. Like the other Gospels, it aims to set down reliable traditions about Jesus life in order to proclaim and to persuade who Jesus is and why the reader should come to trust in Jesus and be his follower.

Yet the close similarities between the other three Biblical Gospels in terms of their structure, chronology, material and language (Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the “synoptic” Gospels - “synoptic” literally means “they look the same”) only serve to highlight just how unique the Fourth Gospel is.

Here’s a quick list of some of the ways in which John is different:

Matthew, Mark, Luke – Synoptics	John – Fourth Gospel
Written in short episodes	Written in long sections
Often clear evidence of copying	“I did it my way”
Takes place over 1 year	Takes place over 3 years
Jesus teaches in parables & short sayings	Jesus teaches through long conversations and monologues – often esoteric
Jesus’ teachings describe God’s coming Kingdom	Jesus’ teachings reveal the Father
Salvation means entering the Kingdom	Salvation means knowing the Father and finding Eternal Life in Him
Jesus is the Messiah	Jesus is the God/Man

Despite these differences, the portraits painted of Jesus by John and the Synoptics are not contradictory but complimentary. The differences are a matter of emphasis rather than of substance.

Q. What differences did you pick up between John’s Gospel and the other three we have read?

The Structure and Style of John’s Gospel

There is a fairly simple structure to John’s Gospel.

1:1-1:18

Prologue

In which we are introduced to the main theme of the book, namely that Jesus is both God and Human. He is the perfect revelation of the Divine Father. But he is also the fully human embodiment of God’s presence.

1:19-12:50

The Book of Signs

In which we discover who Jesus is, through the names people use to describe him, in the claims he makes about himself and, above all, by the “Signs” he performs to substantiate his claims about his identity.

13:1-20:31 **The Book of Glory**

In which Jesus teaches his disciples about the glory of his upside-down kingdom of love, and then embodies that paradoxical glory by suffering and dying on the Cross. Through his death and Resurrection he gains victory – It is the victory of Love over Death.

21:1-21:25 **Epilogue**

In which the Resurrected Jesus is revealed to his disciples and restores Peter after his denial. We are also told about the purpose of the book and the task of the “beloved disciple”.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the style of John’s writing is his love for number patterns. This becomes even more pronounced in the Book of Revelation (also attributed to John and/or his community) where numerical patterns are elevated to the level of an artform. In the Gospel John makes liberal use of cycles of seven, for example:

- There are seven days from the time we are introduced to John the Baptist (1:19) until Jesus performs his first “Sign” at the wedding in Cana (2:1).
- In the same short passage, there are seven titles given to Jesus: Lamb of God (29), Son of God (34), Rabbi (38), Messiah (41), Jesus of Nazareth (45), King of Israel (49), Son of Man (51).
- In the Epilogue after his Resurrection, Jesus appears to seven of his disciples (21:2)

Such cycles of seven also give structure to the book itself. In the Book of Signs (1:19-12:50) for example, there are 7 miracles (signs) performed by Jesus:

1. Water into wine (2:1-11)
2. Healing a royal official’s son (4:46-54)
3. Healing a disabled man (5:1-15)
4. Feeding 5000 (6:1-14)
5. Walking on water (6:16-21)
6. Healing a blind man (9:1-12)
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-43)

Jesus uses a series of seven “I am” statements to make claims about his identity and on seven other occasions John has Jesus saying simply “I am”. We will look at the meaning of these cycles in more detail in the next section.

Q. Q&A

Jesus in John’s Gospel

The emphasis in the Synoptic Gospels was to portray Jesus as the Messiah. In John’s Gospel the emphasis is on Jesus as the God/Man, as the one who is fully God yet also fully human. This is not a new idea but a new way of expressing it and is driven largely by the fact that John is writing to a different audience. Matthew, Mark and Luke also taught that Jesus is divine but they did so by saying that Jesus was the Son of God. As we saw in our first study, such a claim was enough for Hebrew listeners to understand that Jesus was being equated with God. Hebrew listeners might have disagreed – they might have called it heresy – but they knew that to say “Jesus is the Son of God” was the same as saying “Jesus is God”. John, writing to an audience

steeped in Greek philosophy, had to spell things out a little more clearly. Remember that Greek and Roman mythology was full of gods who had children, some of whom were human beings. John wants to be clear that Christianity's claims are not simply that Jesus should be included in a vast pantheon of gods but that there is something unique to his story.

John is trying to put across the idea that Jesus is one with the Eternal and Only God, Creator of the universe, while also being fully a human being – a startling claim to Roman/Greek ears for whom there was impassable chasm between the Divine and Created worlds.

Q. Where does the Doctrine of the Trinity come from?

John begins in the Prologue by linking Jesus to the story of creation in Genesis 1. “In the beginning...” is how both books begin. John goes on to equate Jesus with the “Word” of God. In Greek philosophy the “Word” was understood to be the outward expression of the inward “Mind”. So John says the Word was “with” God (i.e. distinct from God) and the word “was” God (the same as God). This is a paradox that John will maintain throughout his book. How this Divine Word is linked to the human being, Jesus of Nazareth, is explained by John as follows: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14).

John then retells the story of Jesus so that it becomes clear that he truly is the Human embodiment of God. We have already mentioned the seven “signs” in the first half of the book. These are similar miracle stories to the ones we read in the other Gospels, but John deliberately calls them “signs”. They are signs that point us to the truth that Jesus is able to do things that only God can do: Create new wine, heal the sick, provide food (as God provided food for his people in the wilderness), have power over nature and even have the power of life (by raising Lazarus).

Jesus also lays claim to Divinity in his teachings. Jesus makes seven “I am” claims. The very words, “I am”, are a link to the name that God gives Godself in the Old Testament. In his encounter with God at the burning bush (Ex 19) Moses asks what God's name is. The reply is “I am that I am” or “I will be who I will be”. In effect God refuses to give a name but instead retains the freedom to be whatever God chooses to be. Nevertheless, these words “I am who I am” become the “name” by which the Hebrew people refer to their God. Represented by the Hebrew letters YHWH, this “name” was regarded as holy and was never pronounced. So when Jesus uses this form to describe himself, it is a clear claim to divinity.

On seven occasions Jesus uses the words “I am” on their own about himself (4:26, 6:20, 8:24, 8:28, 8:56, 13:19, 18:5). On another seven occasions he uses the words to make claims about himself:

- 6:35 I am the Bread of Life
- 8:12 I am the Light of the World
- 10:7 I am the Gate for the Sheep
- 10:11 I am the Good Shepherd
- 11:25 I am the Resurrection
- 14:6 I am the Way the Truth and the Life
- 15:1 I am the True Vine

Q. Which of these images of Jesus speaks most powerfully to you?

Jesus offers New Life with the Father

Jesus' mission as the Messiah in Matthew, Mark and Luke was to proclaim God's Kingdom Reign. In John's Gospel, the mission is the same but again John uses different language. John expresses the same idea by saying that Jesus has come to reveal the Father to us and to offer us eternal life. These are not two separate things: For Jesus (in John's Gospel), knowing God as our Father *is* eternal life. In other words, "Eternal Life" does not mean a *length* of life that goes on and on interminably but a new *quality* of life that is lived in close relationship with God as Father and that is infused with the Fatherly love of God.

By raising Lazarus from death to life Jesus demonstrates his authority over life and therefore his ability to make claims about offering life. He explicitly states this as his mission in 10:10 when he claims that he comes to give us "life in abundance".

In his long conversation with the disciples at the Last Supper (Ch 13-17), Jesus explains (in rather esoteric terms) how it is possible for us to know God as our Father. "Lord, show us the Father", Philip asks him, to which Jesus replies, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:8-9).

In the end, it is through the Resurrection that Jesus' claims are vindicated. It is the Father's love that brings him through death. He is the embodiment of the New Life. John sums up the purpose of the Gospel as follows: These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

Q. Q & A

Conclusion: The Challenge

In a brief study like this it has been impossible to tease out all the nuances and themes contained in the Gospels. Our focus from the start was to uncover a glimpse of how each of the New Testament writers chose to introduce Jesus to their readers (including us). I hope the study has been able to convey some of the urgency of their messages.

Though each author placed the emphasis in a slightly different place, they were each calling us to respond to Jesus. It is not enough to know something about this man. If Jesus is who they claim he is then he confronts us with a question.

For Paul, Jesus is the source of our righteousness and salvation. Jesus offers us (all of us!) salvation. Will we accept the offer?

For Mark, Jesus is the one who calls us to follow him. Will we go to Galilee (i.e. to read the story again) to have an encounter with Jesus and risk having our lives transformed by him?

For Matthew, Jesus is the promised Messiah who came to fulfill all the terms of the old covenant and to institute a new covenant. Will we become participants in and witnesses to this new covenant?

For Luke, Jesus is the suffering servant who invites us to join him on his journey towards a new, upside-down kingdom where all the outsiders are welcomed home. Will we join the journey?

For John, Jesus is the Son of God who has come to reveal the Father to us so that we may also become the Father's beloved children and enter into a new and eternal life with Him. Will we believe and live?