

John: The Gospel of the Eternal Son Who Reveals the Father

The Maverick Gospel by Mark L. Strauss-

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Anyone reading through the first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—will immediately notice their striking similarities. The three tell many of the same stories, sometimes with identical wording, and follow the same basic storyline. Because of these similarities, these three are called the “Synoptic Gospels” (synoptic means “a common perspective”). While ninety percent of Mark’s stories appear in either Matthew or Luke, ninety percent of the Fourth Gospel — [the Gospel of John](#) — is unique. One commentator calls John the “maverick” Gospel, an appropriate designation for this singular book.

John's Unique Style & Content

Differences in chronology and geographical movement. In the Synoptics, the first part of Jesus’ public ministry occurs in Galilee, where Jesus teaches, heals, and repeatedly comes into conflict with the religious leaders. Jesus then makes his way south to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, where he challenges the religious leaders, is arrested, tried, crucified, and rises from the dead. If we had the Synoptics alone, we might think Jesus’ ministry covered less than a year. By contrast, in John’s Gospel Jesus repeatedly goes to Jerusalem for various festivals. There are three Passovers ([John 2:13, 6:4, 11:55](#), [John 2:13, John 6:4, John 11:55](#)) and three other festivals ([John 5:1, 7:2, 10:22](#) [John 5:1, John 7:2, John 10:22](#)) so that Jesus’ ministry must have been anywhere from two and a half to three and a half yearslong.

Differences in style and literary form. The Synoptic Gospels tend to be made up of short episodes, known as pericopes (pronounced per-í-ko-pēs), which are strung together rather loosely in a narrative sequence. For example, in [Mark 2:1–3:6](#) [Mark 2:1–3:6](#) we find a series of five episodes describing Jesus' conflict with the religious leaders: healing a paralyzed man ([Mark 2:1–12](#) [Mark 2:1–12](#)), the call of Levi the tax collector ([Mark 2:13–17](#) [Mark 2:13–17](#)), Jesus questioned about fasting ([Mark 2:18–22](#) [Mark 2:18–22](#)), and two Sabbath controversies ([Mark 2:23–28](#), [3:1–6](#) [Mark 2:23–28](#), [Mark 3:1–6](#)). Each of these is a pericope, a semi-independent story linked together thematically. John's narrative style is very different. He tends to provide much longer episodes and discourses. Some of these are conversations between Jesus and an individual (e.g., Nicodemus in [ch. 3 John 3](#)); others are miracle stories, followed by extended back-and-forth debate between Jesus and his religious opponents.

Differences in Jesus' message and self-identification. In the Synoptics, Jesus' central message concerns the coming of the [kingdom of God](#) ([Mark 1:13–14](#)), and Jesus' healings and exorcisms are meant to demonstrate its presence and power. People are called to repent and believe in the good news of the kingdom. In this way, they "enter" the kingdom and receive God's promised salvation. Jesus tells parables of the kingdom to describe its nature. In John's Gospel, by contrast, there are no parables or exorcisms. Jesus' teaching focuses much more on his own identity and his unique relationship with the Father. Jesus is the eternal Son who has come to reveal the Father. Salvation comes by knowing the Father through the Son. Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [John 14:6](#) While in the Synoptics salvation is primarily described as entrance into the kingdom, in John it is especially knowing God and eternal life with him. In the Synoptics, Jesus' identity as [Messiah](#) is on center stage. Messiah means "Anointed One" and refers to the promised King and Savior from the line of David, who would save God's people from their enemies and establish God's kingdom ([2 Sam 7:11–17](#) [2 Samuel 7:11–17](#); [Isa 9:1–7](#), [11:1–16](#) [Isaiah 9:1–7](#), [Isaiah 11:1–16](#)). John's portrait of Jesus focuses less on his messiahship and more on his true humanity and true deity. He is the eternal Son and the "Word" (logos) of God, God's self-revelation ([John 1:1](#), [1:14](#), [1:18](#) [John 1:1](#), [John 1:14](#), [John 1:18](#)).

While these are significant differences, they represent complementary rather than contradictory portraits of Jesus. In John, Jesus is not only God in human form and the eternal Son, he is also the Messiah ([John 1:41](#), [4:25–26](#), [11:27](#), [20:30–31](#) [John 1:41](#), [John 4:25–26](#), [John 11:27](#), [John 20:30–31](#)) and the Son of Man ([John 1:51](#), [3:13](#) [John 1:51](#), [John 3:13](#)). Similarly, in the Synoptics Jesus is not only the Messiah, he is also the divine Son who reveals the Father ([Matt 11:25–27](#) [Matthew 11:25–27](#); [Luke 10:21–22](#)). Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God in John as well as the Synoptics ([John 3:3](#), [3:5](#) [John 3:3](#), [John 3:5](#)). In the Synoptics, salvation is described not only as entrance into the kingdom but also as eternal life ([Mark 10:17](#), [10:30](#) [Mark 10:17](#), [Mark 10:30](#)). The differences are therefore a matter of emphasis rather than substance.

John's Context and Setting

So how do we account for the differences? The likely answer is that John was written in a different context and a different time than the Synoptics, probably near the end of the first

century. John is addressing issues of importance and concern for the church of his day. When the Synoptics were written in the 50s–70s, the burning issue for the church was to show that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the fulfillment of [Old Testament](#) promises. How has the kingdom of God arrived if Jesus was crucified and the Romans were still in power? The Synoptics answer that the kingdom came in a different way than expected and that Jesus' messiahship was vindicated and confirmed through his resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God. John is writing somewhat later when the church was confronting different challenges. False teachers have arisen in the church. Some are challenging the deity of Christ, claiming he is not fully God. Others are questioning his true humanity, denying that God could become a human being. From his opening lines, John confirms both the full deity and the true humanity of Jesus: "The Word was with God and the Word was God" ([John 1:1](#) [John 1:1](#)); "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" ([John 1:14](#) [John 1:14](#)).

John's Purpose

John has a clear statement of purpose near the end of his Gospel:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that were not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

[John 20:30–31](#)

John writes to provoke faith in Jesus, resulting in eternal life. "That you may believe" could also be translated "that you may continue to believe." John is likely writing both to call unbelievers to faith in Jesus and to provide confidence for those believers who are struggling in their faith. Their primary opponents are (1) false teachers who have arisen in the church and are denying Jesus' deity or his true humanity, and (2) unbelieving Jews, who have rejected Jesus' claim to be the Messiah and self-revelation of God. John responds by demonstrating that Jesus confirmed through his teaching and his "signs" (see below) that he truly came from the Father to bring eternal life to all who believe. An examination of John's structure will illustrate how he develops this theme.

John's Gospel can be outlined simply into four parts:

- (1) An introductory Prologue ([John 1:1-18](#));
A main body consisting of two parts:
- (2) The Book of Signs ([John 1:19–12:50](#)) and
- (3) The Book of Glory ([John 13:1-20:31](#));
- (4) A concluding Epilogue ([John 21](#)).

The Prologue (1:1–18)

John's magnificent prologue contains the most exalted Christology (description of Christ) in the Bible. Jesus is identified as God's "Word" (logos). This Greek word had a rich history both in Greco-Roman thought and in Judaism. In Greek philosophy, logos could refer to divine reason, the force that brings unity and order to the cosmos. In Judaism, God's Word represented the

dynamic power of God to accomplish his will. God merely speaks the universe into existence. With a word, he can judge and destroy, as well as redeem and save. That Jesus is God's "Word" means he is God's agent of salvation and his self-revelation to human beings. The Word, John says, was both "with God" (distinct from God the Father) and "was God" (fully God). The Word's true deity is confirmed through his identification as the Creator of all things ([John 1:3](#); cf. [Gen. 1:1](#)). Though fully divine, Jesus entered human existence when "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" ([John 1:14](#)). The reason for this incarnation was to bring people back into right relationship with God, to give them "the right to become children of God" by faith ([John 1:12](#)). [John 1:18](#) forms the capstone to the Prologue:

"No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." [John 1:18](#)

Jesus, who is fully human and fully divine, makes known the invisible God.

The Book of Signs (1:19–12:50)

Following the prologue, the first half of John's Gospel is often called the "Book of Signs," since it recounts seven "signs," or miracles, that Jesus performs. The miracles are called signs because they not only demonstrate Jesus' power, but also point to who Jesus is and provoke faith in him. The signs are often linked in some way to Jesus' teaching. For example, Jesus feeds the multitude with loaves and fish, and then teaches that he is the true manna from heaven, the bread of life.

The Seven "Signs"

- Water into wine (John 2:1–11)
- Healing a royal official's son (John 4:46–54)
- Healing a disabled man (John 5:1–15)
- Feeding 5,000 (John 6:1–14)
- Walking on water (John 6:16–21)
- Healing a man born blind (John 9:1–12)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–43)

The first sign, turning water into wine at Cana of Galilee ([John 2:1–12](#)), illustrates their purpose. The miracle, occurring as it does at a wedding celebration, carries symbolic significance. In the Old Testament, God's salvation is described as a great party—the "messianic banquet" that God will throw for all people. It will be "a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines," symbolizing God's final salvation, when "he will destroy the shroud [of death] that enfolds all peoples" and will "swallow up death forever" ([Isa 25:6–8](#); cf. [Rev 19:9](#)). By turning water into wine, Jesus indicates that God's final salvation is arriving through his words and deeds. At the end of the episode, the author identifies this as "the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" ([John 2:11](#)). The purpose of the sign is to reveal Jesus' glory and to provoke faith in him.

The seventh and climactic sign is the raising of Lazarus from the dead ([ch. 11](#)). This sign has two important functions in the Gospel. First, it is the precipitating event that provokes the

religious leaders to act against Jesus. They recognize that if they “let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him.” So they decide they must destroy him. Second, the miracle serves as a preview and foreshadowing of the greatest sign of all—the resurrection of Jesus. Before raising Lazarus, Jesus tells Martha that “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” ([John 11:25](#)). Jesus’ own resurrection will provide resurrection life to all who believe. The seven signs illustrate the importance of symbolism in John’s Gospel. This use of symbols is also seen in seven metaphors, or “I am” statements that Jesus uses to describe himself:

Seven “I am” Sayings

- Bread of Life ([John 6:35](#))
- Light of the World ([John 8:12](#), [9:5](#))
- Gate for the Sheep ([John 10:7–11](#))
- Good Shepherd ([John 10:11–15](#))
- Resurrection & Life ([John 11:23–26](#))
- Way, Truth, & Life ([John 14:1–6](#))
- The True Vine ([John 15:5](#))

In addition to these seven, on at least one occasion, Jesus identifies himself in an absolute sense as “I am,” an apparent allusion to the divine name Yahweh. When the Jewish leaders sarcastically ask if Jesus is greater than Abraham, Jesus replies, “Before Abraham was, I am” ([John 8:58](#)). Jesus’ use of the absolute “I am” (egō eimi) seems to be an allusion to the burning bush episode in [Exodus 3](#), where Yahweh tells Moses that his divine name is “I am who I am” (meaning “the self-existent one” and a play on the divine name Yahweh). Jesus’ opponents apparently understand this to be a claim to deity since they pick up stones to kill him ([John 8:59](#)).

The Book of Glory (13:1–20:31)

The [second major section of John’s Gospel](#) occurs during Jesus’ last days in Jerusalem. It includes the Last Supper, during which Jesus washes the disciples’ feet ([John 13:1–17](#)) and predicts their denial and betrayal ([John 13:18–38](#)); Jesus’ farewell address to his disciples, focusing on the promise of the Holy Spirit and the need to stay connected to Jesus as a vine to its branches ([ch. 14–16](#)); his prayer for himself and his disciples ([ch. 17](#)); his arrest, trial, and crucifixion ([ch. 18–19](#)); and the resurrection narrative ([ch. 20](#)).

This section is called the “Book of Glory” because Jesus’ saving work—his death, resurrection, and exaltation—is repeatedly referred to as his “glorification” ([John 7:39](#), [8:54](#), [11:4](#), [12:16](#), [12:23](#), [13:31](#), [14:13](#), [17:1](#), [17:4–5](#), [John 7:39](#), [John 8:54](#), [John 11:4](#), [John 12:16](#), [John 12:23](#), [John 13:31](#), [John 14:13](#), [John 17:1](#), [John 17:4–5](#)). It is called this because these events bring glory to God ([John 13:31](#), [14:3](#), [17:1](#), [17:4](#), [John 13:31](#), [John 14:3](#), [John 17:1](#), [John 17:4](#)), restore the glory to the Son that he had before the incarnation ([John 8:54](#), [11:4](#), [12:16](#), [12:23](#), [17:1](#), [17:5](#), [John 8:54](#), [John 11:4](#), [John 12:16](#), [John 12:23](#), [John 17:1](#), [John 17:5](#)), and result in our glorification/salvation.

The Epilogue (ch. 21)

John's Gospel concludes with an Epilogue, which appears to have been added after the author's death. Its purpose is to tie up loose ends. It includes another resurrection appearance and a miraculous catch of fish ([John 21:1–14](#)), the restoration of Peter after his denial of Jesus ([John 21:15–19](#)), and the identification of the author as the “the disciple whom Jesus loved” ([John 21:20–25](#)), a character who has appeared repeatedly in the story ([John 13:23](#), [19:26–27](#), [20:2](#), [21:2](#), [21:7](#) [John 13:23](#), [John 19:26–27](#), [John 20:2](#), [John 21:2](#), [John 21:7](#)).

Though the author is not named, Church tradition identifies this “Beloved Disciple” with John the apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of James. This makes good sense, since the Gospel associates him with Peter as one of Jesus' closest disciples ([John 13:24](#), [18:15](#), [20:2–7](#), [21:7](#), [21:20–25](#) [John 13:24](#), [John 18:15](#), [John 20:2–7](#), [John 21:7](#), [John 21:20–25](#)). We know from the Synoptics that Peter, James, and John formed a kind of “inner circle” of disciples ([Mark 5:37](#), [9:2](#), [14:33](#) [Mark 5:37](#), [Mark 9:2](#), [Mark 14:33](#)). Since James died at an early date ([Acts 12:2](#) [Acts 12:2](#)), John remains the most likely candidate.

Church tradition tells us John went to Ephesus where he ministered for a number of years and it was there he wrote his Gospel and the letters that bear his name (1–3 John). As the last of the surviving apostle, he viewed his role as standing firm for the truth against those who would deny it (see [1 John 1:1–3](#), [2:18–27](#) [1 John 1:1–3](#), [1 John 2:18–27](#)). He remained passionate to proclaim the One who was “the way, the truth and the life” ([John 14:6](#)).

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