

An overview of the Gospel of John

A webinar offered as part
of The Good Book Club



MONTREAL DIO
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Montreal Dio is a theological college of the Anglican Church of Canada located in Montreal, Quebec and affiliated with McGill University.

Questions for this evening

- What do you notice if you read the Gospel of John?
- How is the gospel structured?
- What are some key themes?
- For whom was the gospel written?
- How can this gospel speak to us today?

What do you notice if you read the Gospel of John?

- John is a story-teller: long, detailed, complex, and beautiful narratives
 - Nicodemus visits Jesus at night (21 verses in chapter 3)
 - Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well (39 verses in chapter 4)
 - Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (44 verses in chapter 11)
- Where are the parables? No Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son, rich man and Lazarus, “the kingdom of God is like...”
- Jesus talks about himself
 - Repeated “I am” statements: the way, the truth, and the life; the vine; the gate; the bread of life, etc.
 - Talks about where he has come from and what he is up to: “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent him.” (6:38)



What do you notice if you read the Gospel of John?

- Jesus talks at great length
 - “Farewell discourses” in chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17 are one lengthy conversation/teaching/prayer; lengthy discourses in other chapters as well; talkative on the cross
- The Gospel of John is a theological text: many of its statements can’t be understood but in a theological fashion
 - Not only “I am” statements but also parts like prologue: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (1:1)

What do you notice if you read the Gospel of John?

- John is interested in (fixated on?) Judaism
 - Speaks about “the Jews” repeatedly
 - Has a clear interest in and knowledge of Jewish holidays: many key stories in the gospel take place against the backdrop of Jewish holidays
 - Jerusalem is a focus of action: appears at the beginning of the gospel (Jesus cleanses temple in chapter 2), in middle (various healings), and at end (Jesus is crucified)
- John is writing in a polemical and oppositional context
 - “His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.” (9:22)

John and the Synoptics

- John is different from the other three gospels
 - Matthew, Mark, and Luke known as the “synoptic” gospels because they share a similar structure and have overlapping content, e.g. Last Supper, parables, focus on kingdom of God, Jesus’ ministry begins in Galilee and moves toward Jerusalem
- Many things in the synoptics that are not in John
 - In John, there are no parables, no Last Supper, no Lord’s Prayer, barely any references to kingdom, no demon possession
- Matthew, Mark, and Luke are good story-tellers but they sometimes lack detail and move quickly from one story to another
 - Feeding of 5000: 8 verses in Matthew, 12 verses in Mark, 7 verses in Luke, and 16 verses in John
 - John adds little details: e.g. at the feeding of 5000, it was a little boy who had the five “barley” loaves and two fish (6:9)



John and the Synoptics

- Jesus talks in the synoptics but tends to be more didactic, earthy, and direct: be salt and light, pray like this
 - Farewell Discourses are deeply theological, metaphorical, and abstract
- Jesus talks openly about himself in John; in the synoptics, he is more concerned with keeping things secret
 - e.g. Peter confesses him to be Messiah and Jesus “sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone.” (Luke 9:21)

	John	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Kingdom	5	55	20	43
Parable(s)	0	16	12	17
The Jews	63	5	6	3
Pharisees	19	28	12	20
Scribes	1	20	20	14

	John	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Light	23	11	2	15
Life	47	18	10	17
Glory / Glorify	29	7	3	12
Truth	26	1	1	3
World	79	11	4	6
Believe(d)	83	9	14	9
Love	30	11	4	13



How is the Gospel of John structured?

- Prologue: 1:1 to 1:18
 - “In the beginning was the Word...”
- The Book of Signs: 1:19 to 12:50
 - Wedding at Cana, discourses with Nicodemus and Samaritan woman, challenges to Jewish feasts and festivals, raising of Lazarus
 - “Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.” (4:54)
- The Book of Glory: 13:1 to 20:31
 - Last Supper, Farewell Discourses, passion, death, resurrection
- Epilogue: 21:1-25



Key themes in the Gospel of John

- “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” (1:1)
 - Jesus is divine, son of the Father: “the glory as of a father’s only son” (1:14)
 - “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.” (8:58)
- “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (1:4-5)
 - Dualism between light and dark that will run throughout gospel

Key themes in the Gospel of John

- “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” (1:11)
 - Theme of rejection of Jesus by the people God had chosen
 - “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” (3:19)
- “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” (1:12)
 - The Word empowers those who believe in him; believing is the key response to the presence of the Word
 - “Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’” (6:28-29)
 - “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” (14:16)



“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” (1:4)

- **Nicodemus visits Jesus (3:1-21)**
- Prominent religious leader visits Jesus but does so “by night” (v. 2): darkness
- Jesus says: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (v. 3)
- Then says: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him... [but] the people loved darkness rather than light.” (v. 17, 19)
- **Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman (4:4-42)**
- “It was about noon” (v. 6): light!
- Jesus says: “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (v. 14)
- Woman is very human: “give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” (v. 15)
- Woman receives the Word and tells others

Life as a sign

- **Jesus heals the son of a royal official (4:46-54)**
- Jesus has talked about need for rebirth with Nicodemus and eternal life with Samaritan woman
- Then royal official comes to him with a dying son; Jesus says, “Go, your son will live.” (v. 50)
- An example of what Jesus later says: “Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.” (5:21)
- “Now this was the second sign that Jesus did...” (4:54)
- The signs Jesus performs and the encounters he has form part of a broader message about who Jesus is, what he brings, and demonstrates what it means to accept and reject him
- Continual interweaving of themes of light, life, divinity of Jesus highlights the purpose and the message of the gospel (and also John’s skill as an author)



Jesus and Jewish festivals

- Backdrop to Jesus' activity in chapters 5 to 10 is a series of Jewish festivals/holy days: sabbath, Passover, Festival of Tabernacles, Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah)
- Jesus, Passover, and the feeding of the multitude (6:1-71)
 - Jesus refers back to Moses and moves himself beyond Moses: "I am bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die." (6:48-50)
 - Language that evokes the Eucharist: "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give you for the life of the world is my flesh." (6:51)
 - Compare: "This is my body which is given for you." (Luke 22:19)

Jesus and Jewish festivals

- Feeding of multitude is a rare instance in which John parallels the synoptic tradition but makes a key change
 - In synoptics, Jesus often “blesses” the bread before giving it to the crowd
 - In John, he “gives thanks” (Greek word: *eucharistein*) (6:11)
 - Is John riffing on the synoptics, omitting the Last Supper but offering a theological interpretation of a central Christian practice?
- Jesus replaces the Jewish Passover: not an uncontroversial view

The Book of Signs

- 7 (?) signs
 - Water into wine (2:1-11): “Jesus did this, the first of his signs...and revealed his glory.” (v. 11)
 - Healing royal official’s son (4:46-54)
 - Healing paralytic at Bethesda (5:1-15)
 - Feeding the 5000 (6:5-14)
 - Walking on water (6:16-24)
 - Healing man blind from birth (9:1-7)
 - Raising of Lazarus (11:1-45)

From signs to glory

- Last of the signs is the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11: a parallel to the resurrection that will happen at end of gospel
- Transition marked by triumphal entry into Jerusalem and Jesus' own description of what is going on
 - “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (12:23-24)
- John's narrative voice: “Although he had performed many signs in their presence, they did not believe him.” (12:37)
 - Essentially the last use of the word “signs” in gospel



From signs to glory

- Jesus prays: “What should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” (12:27-28)
 - Compare to Jesus praying in Gethsemane: “remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.” (Mark 14:36)
- Signs have been a way to reveal glory but they have been rejected so Jesus is going to glorify the Father
 - What does glory / glorify mean?

“Last Supper”

- Similar to the synoptics in that Jesus warns Peter that he will deny him and warns others about Judas
- Unlike the synoptics in that there is no description of words at meal table
- Jesus washes the feet of disciples and gives them new commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (13:34-35)
 - Compare with: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27-28)

Farewell Discourses

- Lengthy section in chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17
- Begins with a dialogue between Jesus and his followers before moving to Jesus speaking in monologue
- Introduces the Paraclete (“the one called alongside” or “advocate”)
 - “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides in you, and he will be in you.” (14:16-17)
- By chapter 17, Jesus is praying: first, for his own glorification; then for his followers to make his name known

Passion and Death

- John is a great story-teller: story unfolds in exquisite detail with split-screen action
 - “charcoal fire” (18:18); Pilate’s question: “what is truth?” (18:38); “purple robe” (19:2); dispute over sign above Jesus’ cross (19:21-22); seamless robe (19:23)
- John makes theological points out of details
 - Women are standing at foot of cross along with “disciple whom he loved” (other gospels have them at a distance)
 - Jesus unites them into a new familial relationship (19:26-27): anticipation of new community of disciples who are part of family of Jesus

Passion and Death

- Focus on “the Jews”
 - “The Jews answered [Pilate]: ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.’” (19:7)
 - “[Pilate] said to the Jews, ‘Here is your King!’ They cried out, ‘Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!’” (19:15)
- Words at death: “It is finished” (19:30)
 - What is it? The glorification?

Resurrection

- Again, great story-telling with some incredible dialogue and memorable scenes
- Jesus calls Mary Magdalene by name and she recognizes him (20:16)
 - “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” (10:3, 4)
- Jesus tells Mary to “go to my brothers” (20:17): first time he has referred to his followers in a familial fashion
 - “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” (1:12)

Resurrection

- Jesus breathes the Spirit on his followers: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.... Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:2, 22)
 - The Advocate is here: a moment that combines Pentecost and the Great Commission
- Thomas doubts then sees Jesus and says, “My Lord and my God!” (20:29): strongest Christological confession of entire gospel
- “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not yet seen and yet have come to believe.” (20:29)
 - That’s you, the reader

Who wrote John and for whom?

- Did more than one person write the gospel as we have it?
 - Midst of Farewell Discourses: “Rise, let us be on our way.” (14:31)
 - Two endings? “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (20:30-31)
 - Then chapter 21 and a further resurrection appearance (in Galilee) and a further conclusion: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (21:25)
- Who is “the disciple whom Jesus loved”?

The Johannine Community

- A group of Jesus' followers come into conflict with synagogue leaders and are expelled
 - Conflict is over divinity of Jesus (high view of Christ)
 - Jesus calls Jews children of the devil (8:43); continued concern in text about fear of being put out of synagogue (e.g. 12:42)
- This group of Jesus' followers open to influences of Greek-speaking world but also see the "world" as something to be concerned about
 - Emphasis on pre-existent logos in keeping with Greek philosophy
 - "God so loved the world.." (3:16) but also "the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world." (17:14)



The Johannine Community

- This group may also be concerned about other Christian communities forming around other followers of Jesus
 - Not a wonderful depiction of Peter: questions foot washing (13:6-9); lengthy telling of Peter's denial of Christ (18:15-18, 25-27); beloved disciple gets to empty tomb first (20:8)
- Result is suspicion of "the world"; animus towards "the Jews"; and a focus on the core Johannine community: "love one another"
- Ultimately the Johannine community is brought into the fold of the expanding church and their gospel is seen as helpful for the broader church
 - Chapter 21 is added: redeems Peter while also building up the beloved disciple



How can we read this now?

- Gospel “written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (20:31)
- Exquisite stories of the everyman/ woman encounter with Christ and transforming result of that encounter, e.g. Samaritan woman, man born blind, Mary Magdalene
- Both accessible and deep

How can we read this now?

- Great themes of enduring relevance
- Truth: “What is truth?” (18:38)
- Love: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.” (13:34)
- World: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but... they do not belong the world.” (17:14)
- Belief: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (6:29)
- Life: “I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” (10:10)



What's next?

Read the Gospel (and read it again and again!); read I, II, III John

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