

Major Differences Between John and the Synoptic Gospels (W. Hall Harris)

Introduction: The Relationship of John's Gospel to the Synoptics.

Two basic positions on the relationship of John's Gospel to the Synoptics are possible:

1. If John knew of the synoptics, then he wrote to supplement them. (To say John knew of one or more of the synoptics is not to say, however, that he wrote his gospel with copies of Matthew, Mark, and/or Luke in front of him. John may have been aware of the existence of other written accounts of Jesus' life and ministry without actually having seen them.)
2. If John's Gospel is totally independent from the synoptics, he had enough material to choose from that much of it does not overlap with the synoptics (cf. Jn 20:30 and 21:25). This point is strengthened considerably if one accepts the Fourth Gospel's claim to reflect eyewitness testimony about the life and ministry of Jesus (John 21:23-24).

Major Differences Between John and the Synoptic Gospels

1. **Omission by John of material found in the synoptics.** John's Gospel omits a large amount of material found in the synoptic Gospels, including some surprisingly important episodes: the temptation of Jesus, Jesus' transfiguration, and the institution of the Lord's supper are not mentioned by John. John mentions no examples of Jesus casting out demons. The Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's prayer are not found in the Fourth Gospel. There are no narrative parables in John's Gospel (most scholars do not regard John 15:1-8 ["the Vine and the Branches"] as a parable in the strict sense).
2. **Inclusion by John of material not found in the synoptics.** John also includes a considerable amount of material not found in the synoptics. All the material in John 2—4, Jesus' early Galilean ministry, is not found in the synoptics. Prior visits of Jesus to Jerusalem before the passion week are mentioned in John but not found in the synoptics. The seventh sign-miracle, the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11) is not mentioned in the synoptics. The extended Farewell Discourse (John 13—17) is not found in the synoptic Gospels.
3. **Different length of Jesus' public ministry.** According to John, Jesus' public ministry extended over a period of at least three and possibly four years. During this time Jesus goes several times from Galilee to Jerusalem. The synoptics appear to describe only one journey of Jesus to Jerusalem (the final one), with most of Jesus' ministry taking place within one year.
4. **'High' Christology as opposed to the synoptics.** The Prologue to John's Gospel (1:1-18) presents Jesus as the "λογος" [word] become flesh (1:14). John begins his Gospel with an affirmation of Jesus' preexistence and full deity, which climaxes in John 20:28 with Thomas' confession "My Lord and my God!" The non-predicated *ἐγώ εἰμι* [I am] sayings in the Fourth Gospel as allusions to Exod 3:14 also point to Jesus' deity (John 8:24, 28, 58). Compare Mark who begins his Gospel with Jesus' baptism and Matthew and Luke who begin theirs with Jesus' birth. John begins with eternity past ("In the beginning the Word already was...").
5. **Literary Point of View: John versus the synoptics.** The synoptics are written from a third person point of view, describing the events as if the authors had personally observed all of them and were reporting what they saw at the time. Thus they are basically descriptive in their approach. John's Gospel, on the other hand, although also written from a third person point of view, is more reflective, clearly later than the events he describes. The author of the Fourth Gospel very carefully separates himself from the events he describes. However clear it is that he was an eyewitness of the life of Jesus, it is no less clear that he looks back upon it from a temporal distance. While we see the events through his eyes, we are carefully guided to see the events of Jesus' life not as John saw them when they happened but as he now sees them. We understand more of the significance of the events described from the position the writer now holds than an eyewitness could have understood at the time the events took place. In this sense John's Gospel is much more reflective.



6. **Extended dialogues or discourses rather than proverbial sayings.** John presents his material in the form of extended dialogues or discourses rather than the 'proverbial' or 'pithy' sayings found often in the synoptics: John 3 (with Nicodemus); John 4 (with the Samaritan woman); John 6 (the Bread of Life Discourse); John 13—17 (the Farewell Discourse with the disciples). As L. Goppelt observed: "The Gospel of John passed on the words of Jesus predominantly in another genre than the synoptics; it did not do so in sayings, parables, and controversy dialogues, but in connected or dialogical discourses."
7. **Use of symbolism and double meaning.** John makes more frequent use of these literary techniques than the synoptics. Examples: John 2:25 (temple/body); John 7:37-38 (water/Spirit); John 12:32 (lifted up/exalted). Much of this symbolism takes the form of dualistic antitheses: light/darkness (1:4; 3:19; 8:12; 11:9; 12:35, 46); truth/falsehood (8:44); life/death (5:24; 11:25); above/below (8:23); freedom/slavery (8:33, 36). Much of this antithetical dualism is also found in the Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) texts. See J. H. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1QS 3:13-4:26 and the 'Dualism' Contained in the Gospel of John", in *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1990).
8. **Use of the "misunderstood statement."** John makes frequent use of the "misunderstood statement" as a literary technique. Jesus says something to someone which is misunderstood, thus giving Jesus a further opportunity to clarify what he really meant. Examples: John 3 (Nicodemus' misunderstanding of the new birth as a second physical birth); John 4 (the Samaritan woman's misunderstanding of the living water as drinkable water).
9. **Ipsissima verba versus ipsissima vox.** The long discourses in John's Gospel do not necessarily represent Jesus' exact words (*ipsissima verba*) as long as they give a faithful summary and interpretive paraphrase (*ipsissima vox*) of what he actually said. Jesus' teaching in the Fourth Gospel may be couched in distinctively Johannine style. On the other hand, some of John's style may have been either directly or indirectly inspired by Jesus' own manner of speaking: in Mt 11:25-27 + Lk 10:21-22 Jesus uses language almost identical to that which characterizes his speeches in John's Gospel— "all things have been given to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor the Father except the Son and the one to whom the Son wishes to reveal him."
10. **"Kingdom of God" versus "eternal life."** The emphasis on the Kingdom of God found in the synoptics is largely missing in John (the phrase βασιλεία του θεου, "kingdom of God" occurs only twice in John's Gospel (3:3, 5) and the noun βασιλεία, "kingdom" only three times (all in 18:36). Instead we find John's emphasis on 'eternal life' as a present reality (John 5:24 etc.). The emphasis on 'eternal life' in John's Gospel is closer to the letters of Paul than to the synoptic gospels.
11. **Realized eschatology in the Gospel of John.** The problem of so-called 'realized' eschatology in the Gospel of John (the term was popularized by C. H. Dodd) can be seen in microcosm in John 5:20b-30. On the one hand there are statements that speak of the parousia (second advent) as a future event in the traditional sense: "...for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good to a resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29 NASB). Alongside these on the other hand are statements that seem to speak of the full realization for believers of salvation in the present (5:20-27): "Truly, truly, I say to you he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24 NASB). There is an obvious tension between these statements that must be reconciled; judgment cannot be both present and future at the same time. Related to John's emphasis on 'eternal life' as a present reality is the stress on judgment as realized in a person's response to Jesus (John 3:19). In addition John's Gospel does not emphasize the second advent of Christ as a future eschatological event (John 14:3 is about the only clear reference).
12. **Differences in grammatical style from the synoptic gospels.** The Gospel of John is written in a style of Greek quite different from the synoptics. The range of vocabulary is smaller. There is frequent parataxis (use of coordinate clauses rather than subordinate clauses). Asyndeton frequently occurs. Related to paragraph (7) above, there is little difference between the words that are ascribed to Jesus and the words of the Evangelist. Example: try to determine in John 3:1-21 where the words of Jesus to Nicodemus end and the interpretive comments of the Evangelist begin.