

The Gospel of John

What, above all else, constitutes the miracle of the gospel of John? Perhaps it is this: the most profound of thoughts conveyed in the simplest of words. The simplest of words arranged in the simplest of sentences yet possessing a depth unparalleled in literature. If the challenge with Matthew, Mark and Luke is to spot the differences between them, with John the challenge is rather to spot the points of contact with the other three! That is how different this gospel is. In style. In vocabulary. In plot development. In the essential way the gospel is constructed.

Episodes

The way John builds together his narrative of Jesus' life is essentially this: by choosing very very few episodes, but developing each one in considerable detail. Most of the individual incidents selected for inclusion in the gospel take up considerably more narrative space than is the case for the synoptics, allowing fuller thematic development and more extensive word and idea play. Each incident is used as a springboard to present the teaching of Jesus and the responses he encountered. If Matthew gathers the teachings of Jesus into groups, John selects an incident, and uses it to showcase the teaching of Jesus and his interaction with others. Usually an incident grows into an extensive dialogue, often between Jesus and his opponents or Jesus and the disciples.

In this sense, then, John's gospel is episodic. It does not present a synopsis of the things Jesus did in the manner of the other gospels ('the world could not contain the books...' if this were

to be done after John's fashion!). Instead it selects few episodes for much more extensive treatment, each exhibiting Jesus' communication – both with us and with them (take, for instance, the way in which Jesus' night time encounter with Nicodemus grows into the incredible teaching of chapter 3, or the incident of the woman at the well filling most of chapter 4).

John's Chronology

John's gospel gives us the best means to approximate a chronology of Jesus' ministry, for he refers to three consecutive Passovers (2v13-3v21; 6v4-55; 13v1-19,42). This gives us:

1 year	116 verses	3v22-6v2
1 year	295 verses	6v66-12v50
2 weeks	xx verses	chs 13-20 ... of which
24 hours	xx verses	chs 13-19

Yet within that broad technique there are motifs and patterns to be witnessed. In his teaching Jesus often returns to the same type of language, adopting a patterned register of speech. A very familiar motif is the repeated 'I am' expressions of Jesus which are an insistent reminder of the Father's identity as revealed to Moses in the bush, and the fact that this identity is now revealed in the person of His son. Another is the selection of the sequence of 'signs' which are woven through the account. These are so well recognised and discussed as recurring patterns within the gospel that I shall not develop them further here.

A man of few words

Let's turn, instead, to further exploration of John's words. Some writers have a rich vocabulary – parading and exploring the farthest reaches of the lexicon. But John is not amongst them. He uses a very basic word set – words like life, light, truth, bread, world, love, send, show – and arranges them into straightforward, simple sentences. Why use a long word when a short one will do? Why use complex subordinated constructions when one can simply say 'and ...' or begin a new sentence? John does not use complex literary tools to achieve his profundity.

Instead, simple words and deep meanings. Make the reader do the work! Of course, one consequence of having a small vocabulary is that the words you do use, you tend to use quite a lot.

John's words do overtime for him, and repay close study. Rep-

etition and wordplay is one of John's most powerful literary techniques and one which merits attention. A word may have different nuances – it might mean different things to different characters, or there might be a play between Jesus' true understanding of a concept and the perception of his conversation-partners. Or there might be a stepwise development of the way in which a word is used during the flow of the gospel.

The table provides an extensive list of some of John's favourite words.

Virtually every one on the list is notable, not only because John uses it a lot, but also because it occurs far more in John on a proportionate basis than elsewhere in the New Testament. Noticing these repeated words and themes and watching how they unfurl and develop during the course of the gospel is a very fruitful avenue of study and a helpful lens for bringing the message into focus.

The Courtroom

It's worth noticing that some of the terms cluster into groups. To take just one example, there is a whole set of words which revolve around the courtroom. The word witness is the most obvious example. Around half of its 100 or so NT occurrences are in John, and it is interesting that one of the original usages of the Greek word (which is related to our English word martyr) was of one who authenticated his testimony by means of his blood. This is fascinating background to set alongside the witness our Lord provides in the gospel. The vocabulary of the court room goes much further than this one term, however. Along with it go

Some of John's Special Words

References like 10x/31 mean 10 occurrences in John's gospel, and 31 total in the NT. These counts refer to original words, not the English translations.

Love (agapao and phileo 10x/31) and hate 9x/38

Shew, make manifest 8x/43; openly 9x/31; light and darkness 6x/12

See, perceive, look, behold (theoreo 25x/59, horao 23x/59), know

Die, death, be born, live

I, me, mine, myself

Exclusive negatives (no man, nothing, no more, not yet, never

Courtroom vocabulary (see discussion in the body text)

Meat, feast, water, thirst

Be glorified (doxazo the verb, rather than the noun doxa)

Ever(lasting)

Truth

Ask, beseech, pray, seek

at least the following:

- Testify
- Truth
- Believe
- Show
- Convict / condemn
- Judge
- Answer

Not all of these are obliged to have a forensic or courtroom context, yet once that potential background is spotted, new avenues of meaning are revealed. An awareness of this word-group also enables us to spot an important ‘frame’ around the gospel in its first and last chapters, as seen in the sidebar.

John’s extensive account of the trial of Jesus also takes on a new light, and an additional dimension is added to Jesus’ use of the ‘I am’ expression when the courtroom motif is borne in mind. Not only is ‘I am’ an expression of Jesus’ union with his father, it is also an affirmation of who he is, and of his existence in the absolute (his very existence is a message in itself). The expression also echoes Isaiah 40-55 which persistently emphasises the reality of God’s existence, and which similarly plays on the language of the courtroom.

The practical point from all of this is that, ultimately, it is neither Jesus nor his identity which is on trial in the gospel (although the gospel could productively be looked at in that way). It is us. It is how we respond to the testimony of Jesus that John presents which will determine our destiny.

Opposites repel

Looking further into John’s special vocabulary, it is particularly noticeable how much of it divides itself naturally into pairs of opposites: light versus dark(ness), truth versus lies, ‘of God’ or ‘of the world / of the devil’, from above or from beneath, life versus death. Literary critics call these pairs binary oppositions, and John is a great user of them.

Although such a polarised vision of the world might seem sim-

The frame of John’s gospel

Opening Frame: “And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him ... And I saw, and bare record, that this is the Son of God.” (1v32,34)

Closing Frame: “This is the disciple which testifieth (same word family) of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony (same word family) is true.” (21v24)

plistic ('how can he be so black and white?!'), in actual fact it conforms to how things are from God's perspective. And to how things will ultimately be for us upon the day of judgement. At the end of the day, we shall either be in God's kingdom, or we shall not. We shall not be in limbo, half in and half out. Even today, we are either the servants of God or the servants of sin; Jesus makes it plain that we may not serve two masters. We have a tendency to complicate, to rationalise, to justify and to obscure – to hide the true absolutes of life, the rights and wrongs, because they impose decisions upon us that we would rather not make. John's gospel does not allow us this luxury. It tells it like it is – from God and Jesus' perspective. We have to choose our allegiance and our lifestyle, we have to choose God's saving grace

Patterns of 7 and 8

On a number of occasions in the gospel, Jesus identifies himself with the special expression 'I am...' which echoes God's unique revelation of Himself back in Exodus 3 and 6. 6v35; 8v12; 10v7, 11; 11v25; 14v6; and 15v1 all share the same grammatical sentence structure in their 'I am' expressions. Notice that there are seven of them in total. It has also been noted (correspondingly?) that there are seven signs in chapters 1-12 (although most people usually talk of the 8 signs in John's gospel, they are including xx - the last sign is separated from the seven by some distance in terms of the gospel narrative). Some have argued that there are seven major discourses in the gospel (3v16-21; 4v5-27; 5v19-47; 6v27-58; 7-8; 10v1ff; chs 14-17),

over the route of condemnation – and in making these choices we shall be choosing our destiny.

The use of binary oppositions in John, then, is not a childish or even a childlike way of conceiving the world; nor is it for us a mere literary technique which we may observe and nod wisely because we have spotted

it. It is there as a constant reminder that there are only two ways, a broad and a narrow. There is no third way. And there is only one way which leads to life.

'That you might believe'

As far as understanding the overall shape and pattern of John's gospel is concerned, it is perhaps the verb 'believe' which is the most fundamental. It is the verb which unlocks the way of life we have just been discussing. A measure of its significance can be gathered from the fact that of its 239 NT occurrences, a staggering 98 are in John's gospel! One of the classic passages which develops the theme is of course 3v16-18, but there are countless others.

We know it is an important word because John flags it as a key reason why he wrote the gospel in the first place. Such a self-

conscious statement of purpose is special only to Luke and John amongst the gospel writers, and it makes John 20v30-31 a key text:

*“And many other signs of Jesus truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.”
(John 20v30-31)*

So there we have it: the purpose of the gospel in nutshell. But the way John has chosen to convince us is fascinating. He makes us watch the astonishing encounters between Jesus and other people – he makes us watch their fumbling for the answer, and their decisions, whether wise or foolish. And from this meeting we can begin to formulate our own response.

As we proceed through the first half of the gospel (chapters 1 thru 12), John keeps given us progress updates concerning the decisions the characters make with respect to belief or rejection of Jesus. Some of these are illustrated in the panel. This comes to a head at the end of chapter 6, only to reach an even greater climax in chapter 12.

Progress updates: Who believes and who doesn't

“This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him.” (2v11)

“...many believed on his name, when they saw the miracles...” (2v23)

“And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the saying of the woman...” (4v39)

“...and himself believed, and his whole house.” (4v53)

“But there are some of you that believe not.” (6v64)

“As he spake these words, many believed on him.” (8v30)

“If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him; and the Romans shall come and take away our place.” (11v48)

“But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him.” (12v37)

The transition point at the end of 12 is particularly significant. By this time courses have been set, minds are made up, Jesus' world has been divided in two – those who believe, and those

Broad structure of the gospel

- 1-12 To believe, or not to believe
- 13-17 Care for his own (the believers)
- 18-21 The witness of his love for the world (death and resurrection)

who do not. And at this point Jesus turns away from the crowds, and from people at large, whether they be intrinsically friendly or hostile. Now he concentrates on his own (Jn 17), those who have believed on him and whom the Father has given him out of the world. His focus on them and their relationship with the Father in chapters 13-17 is almost total. The others have had their opportunity; now, facing as he is his ultimate trial, Jesus concentrates upon those he loves and tries to prepare them for what lies ahead, through the period of his passion and far beyond. As he himself acknowledges, “the Father Himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God.” (16v27). These chapters (13-17) which chart Jesus’ wonderful care for his own are unique amongst the gospel writings.

So it is that, past chapter 12, the belief vocabulary becomes much less dominant. For after the denouement of the believe/reject issue in chapter 12, for the Jews and for humankind at large, Jesus is pre-occupied with the believers and belief becomes a non-issue. We can thus arrive at a broad three-fold division of the gospel, as shown in the sidebar.

Three further themes

Space is running out, but there are three further aspects which seem so pervasive to John’s message and style that mention must be made, however cursorily.

The first is the intimacy between Jesus and his Father. Indeed, father is another of John’s characteristic terms. Jesus never tires of speaking of his father, and never loses an opportunity to emphasise their closeness. When we think of passages like “I and the Father are one” or “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” or “I proceeded forth and came from God” or “the word was God ... and the word was made flesh”, we realise that Jesus was at pains to prevent us underestimating their relationship or the extent to which he was the express image of His person.

It was this aspect that continually offended the rulers and perplexed the people. Yet this appeared only to drive Jesus to talk more about it! It was and is impossible to accept Jesus on any

other than his terms. That meant – and means – meeting God Himself in His manifestation in the person of His son. Jesus was

“It is the discovery of sub-surface signals which had previously escaped the reader’s notice that allows the gospel to be read again and again with pleasure and profit. Traffic on the gospel’s subterranean frequencies is so heavy that even the perceptive reader is never sure he or she has received all the signals the text is sending.” R. Alan Culpepper, *The Anatomy of John’s Gospel*

obsessed by his father and his God, and so should we be.

A second topic is more stylistic than thematic, but the style contains a thematic purpose. It is John’s use of irony. The greatest irony of the gospel is of course Jesus’ rejection by his own people. The Jews ironically and paradoxically reject the Messiah they expect, and say ‘No!’ to God’s ‘Yes.’ But beyond this broad thematic, there are many specific examples where people say things which are ironically true contrary to the intention with which they said them. One or two examples:

Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? (implied ‘No!’, yet it did!)

Art thou greater than our father Jacob which gave us this well? (surely not!)

(Spoken by the rulers) Are we blind also? (Impossible!)

There are many, many more. Indeed, once one starts to spot irony and subtle humour within the gospel, it seems to crop up repeatedly. Some other passages to consider would be: 7v20,26,35,42,48; 8v22,53; 18v38, and the whole episode of the man born blind in chp 9.

The Jews

John’s use of the phrase ‘the Jews’ may sometimes be ironic. It is possible that this is the case when he ‘explains’ Jewish traditions (for instance, ‘the Passover – a feast of the Jews’). It has sometimes been too readily assumed that these references show that John was writing

What is the message of this irony? Chiefly this: people often do not, in fact, know, even when they think they do. Yet Jesus knows them! It is human nature to think we know what the score is, to think we can rationalise and fairly evaluate a situation. Yet when we encounter the Lord Jesus, we find that we have been in the habit of constantly deceiving ourselves. We are brought up short by our lack of knowledge and self-sufficiency. We come to learn that he knows and we don’t.

A final theme relates to the point of the last paragraph. There are many misunderstandings in the gospel of John – and some-

times Jesus deliberately encourages these so that ultimately a deeper point will be learned. He talks of bread, and people can think only of their next meal; he speaks of being born again, and they can only visualise (or in this case, fail to) the concept of entering the second time into one's mother's womb. There many many examples of this type; John appears to be a collector of them, in the interest of showing us that we need to enter into a different thought-world and a different dimension of living when we embrace him.

Jesus is not scared of offending people (look how he deliberately upsets Jewish sensibilities in chapter 6), and nor is he afraid of speaking to them on another plane from the one in which they are currently on in the hope/expectation that they will eventually raise their game and catch up. He is spiritual, we are natural – and inclined to think natural, earthly thoughts. We tend to be concerned with the trivial and mundane, the here and now. It takes considerable effort for us to lift our sights and behold the things that are 'from above' and 'of God'. If John's gospel helps us to do this, it will for this reason alone (not to say the many others) have been well worth the writing.