

Differences Between the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels and Acts

The gospel according to John is very different than the other three gospels – aka synoptic gospels – (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) as well as the book of Acts. It is my firm belief then, that we must learn to read it differently and think about it in different terms. Many will counter with this argument: “Well, the Apostle John [according to tradition] wrote it, and he was actually there.” These folks forget, however, as can be seen in the lists of disciples from the synoptics in point “B” below that Matthew was also a disciple, and according to tradition, he wrote Matthew.

One very important difference is the style. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus teaches primarily in short sayings and parables. In John, we find neither of these; instead, we find long monologues. There are fewer “signs” in John as well. On top of that, many “details” are quite different:

- A. In the Synoptics, Jesus does not begin his ministry until John is imprisoned (see Mark 1:14). John 3:24 shows their ministries overlapping.
- B. Disciples vary
 - i. Mark 3: ¹⁶ So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); ¹⁷ James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); ¹⁸ and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.
 - ii. Matthew 10: ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.
 - iii. Luke 6: ¹⁴ Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, ¹⁵ and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶ and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.
 - iv. John has no list of all 12, and he never names the John the Apostle, the 2 James, Levi / Matthew, Thaddaeus, Bartholomew, or 1 Simon (not Peter). However, he does add Nathaniel.
- C. John's Gospel notes 3 Passovers. So, if you take him literally and chronologically (which I don't think we should do – that's not John's point), then Jesus' ministry is about 3 years. For the Synoptics, it appears to only be one year as only one Passover is noted.
- D. John 13-17, though definitely the “Last Supper,” is not a Passover Meal. John 18:28 makes clear that the Passover meal is to be eaten the evening after Jesus is crucified (compare that to Mark 14:12-18, which makes clear that Jesus did eat the Passover, so he was crucified the day after).
- E. According to the stories of the “Garden of Gethsemane” in the Synoptics, Jesus says something to the effect of “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want,” as is seen in Mark 14:36. Compare these passages from John that seem to remove any semblance of asking that the cup be removed:
John 12:27 – “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour?'; No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”
John 18:11b – “Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”
- F. In John, Jesus carries the cross by himself (John 19:17) but in the synoptics, Simon of Cyrene carries the cross.
- G. In John, Jesus is crucified sometime AFTER noon (see John 19:14). Mark 15:25 says it has happened by 9am.
- H. John 20:19-23 has a completely different understanding of how the disciples receive the Holy Spirit than the book of Acts does. For John, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them. For Acts, they are told to go to Jerusalem and wait for it to come AFTER Jesus has already ascended. Either John disagrees with Acts' understanding, or he has never heard Acts' version.