John and the Synoptic Gospels

In this worksheet, we will look at:

- features of John's story line that are different from the Synoptics, and
- features of John's narrative world.

Story Line: The Shape of Jesus' Ministry

The first three Gospels build their story around four geographical/temporal moments:

1. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan (near Jerusalem),
2. his ministry in Galilee,
3. his journey to Jerusalem,
4. and his trial, crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem.

With the exception of Luke's scene of the boy Jesus in the temple, the synoptic gospels tell the story of one trip to Jerusalem, one Passover, and one series of controversies between Jesus and the Jewish authorities.

John's story is structured differently.

- **Jesus in the temple.**

Where is the "cleansing of the temple" in the Synoptics, compared with John?

In each of the Synoptics, Jesus' adult ministry begins with his baptism. Is there a baptism scene in John's Gospel?

- **Jesus in Jerusalem.** It is from John's Gospel that we get the idea of a three-year ministry for Jesus. In John's Gospel, Jesus travels back and forth to Jerusalem for three Passovers.

See:
- John 2:13, 23
- John 6:4
- John 11:55
- Jesus is also in Jerusalem once for an unnamed festival (John 5:1).

- **Jesus as Passover Lamb.** Note how John the Baptist refers to Jesus when he sees him (1:29; 36).

  - Bible Trivia: does anyone else, anywhere in the NT, refer to Jesus as the "Lamb of God"?
  - Jesus is not only called the lamb of God in John's Gospel. He becomes the lamb of God. He is crucified in this Gospel during the time that the real lambs are being slaughtered for the Passover. Remember that in the Synoptics, Jesus actually eats the Passover with his disciples before his arrest. John's timing of the story is different. See Throntveit's article (bibliography in Further Reading below) for more on this.

- **Jesus as doing a little, then talking a lot.** The synoptic gospels are mostly made up of vignettes from the life of Jesus. Parables, sayings, miracle stories, healings: tidbits are strung together into an overall narrative. Sometimes people have talked about the evangelists as
arranging "pearls on a string." John’s Gospel does not work exactly that way. Instead, there are signs and then long scenes where Jesus talks or argues with people about what the sign means.

See for example,
- The feeding of the five thousand (John 6),
- The healing of the man born blind (John 9).

**Features of John’s Narrative World**


- **Time blurs in the world created by John’s Gospel.** Jesus is the eternal Word as well as the incarnate Word. He can speak to Nicodemus of being born over (meaning both "born again" and "born from above"; cf. 3:3). He can speak on the verge of his death about his on-going presence with the disciples ("I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you" [14:18]). "Then" and "now" and "not yet" all flow in and out of each other in this story.

- **Several polarities describe this world.** Reading through John, one notices several pairs of opposites. These provide structure to the world created by the Gospel. Look for these polarities:
  - light/darkness
  - above/below
  - good/evil
  - truth/lies
  - life/death
  - knowing/not knowing

- **"The world" describes both a threatening place, and those for whom Christ died.**
  - "Take heart, I have overcome the world," Jesus says (16:33). To Pilate, he says, "My kingdom is not from this world" (18:36).
  - Yet the Gospel does not allow us to become a cozy community, turning away from the world in order to enjoy the superior fellowship of one another. "For God so loved the world," John says, "that he gave his only begotten Son that everyone who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (3:16).

- **The Incarnation reveals the glory of God.** From Richard Hays: "No other New Testament writing so vividly visualizes the eternal in, with, and under the ordinary" (*Moral Vision*, 156). From the Prologue: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known" (1:18).

**Further Reading**

