

Preaching From the Gospel of John

Session 1 – *The Unique Contribution of the Fourth Gospel*

Richard A Burridge (*Four Gospels, One Jesus?*) examines an early understanding by Irenaeus (d. 202) of Ezekiel 1:10 and Revelation 4:7 in which Irenaeus argues that these prophecies required that there be four – no more and no less – gospels. By the time of Jerome (347-420), the identification had come to be Matthew = Human face, Mark = Lion, Luke = Ox, and John = Eagle. While this interpretation is not convincing, the symbolism can be useful in helping Christians appreciate the special contributions made by each of the four gospels.



Matthew – The Gospel with a Human Face

1. 42% unique material
2. 5 great sermons, each ending with “and it happened when Jesus had completed these sayings...” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1)
3. Jesus is viewed primarily as *Messiah*.
4. A very Jewish Gospel
5. Sometimes an almost anti-Jewish Gospel

Mark – The Bounding Lion

1. 7% unique material – 90% is repeated in Matthew
2. Fast paced – Key word is “immediately” (42 times). “...Mark’s vividness and pace; no one knows where the lion comes from, or where he is going as he leaps on.” (Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?*, 37)
3. Dark, suffering, fearful tone
4. Drama in recognition of who Jesus is
5. Emphasis on miracles



Luke – The Plodding Ox



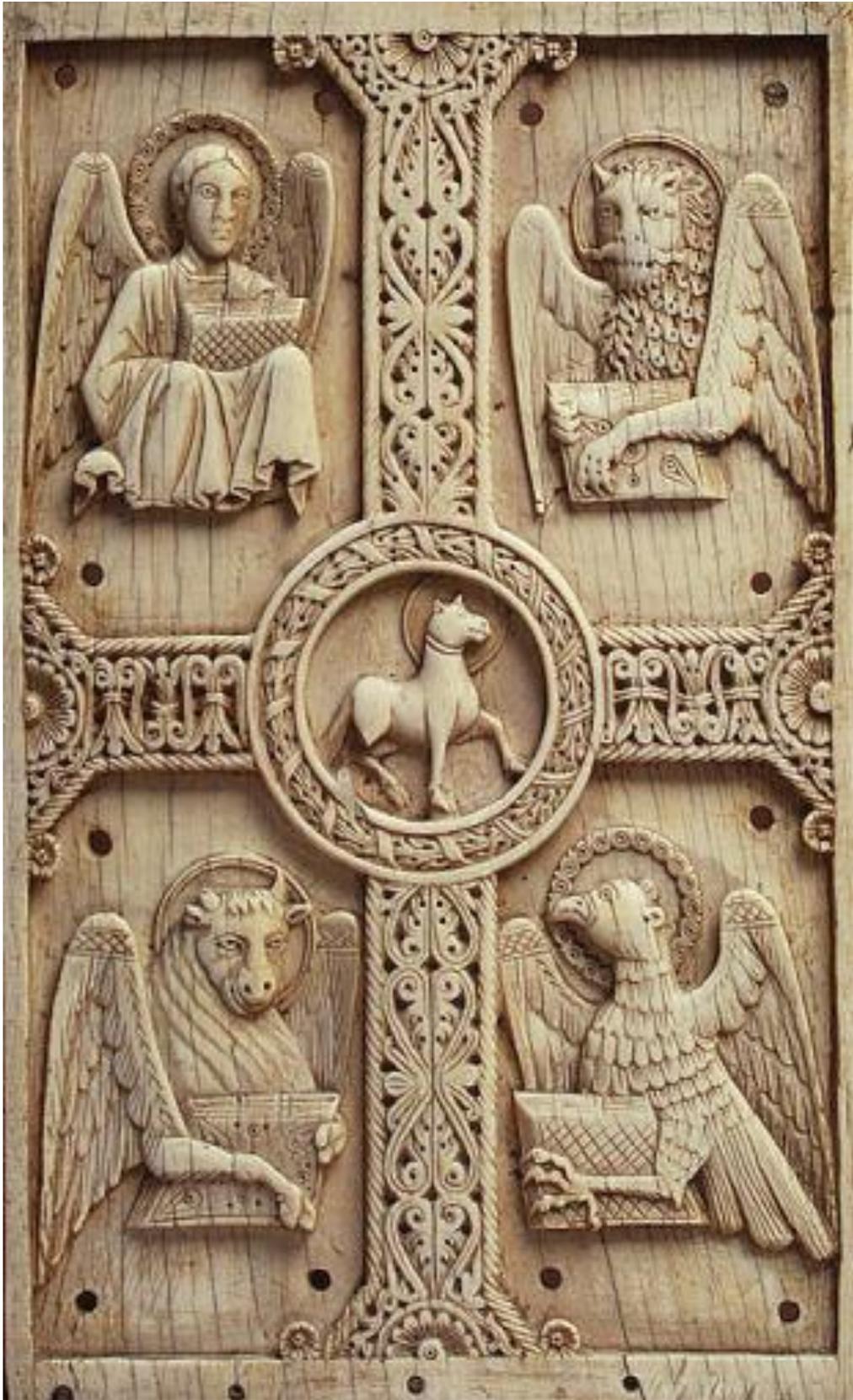
1. 58% unique material
2. Slow, steady, lumbering Gospel
– Jesus relentlessly heading to Jerusalem
3. Emphasizes the Holy Spirit, women, and the disadvantaged
4. A very “orderly account” (1:3) of the events of Jesus’ life
5. A special focus on parables

John – The Soaring Eagle



1. 92% unique material
2. Most theological or spiritual Gospel – the view from 10,000 feet high
3. Simple, repetitive vocabulary
4. Key purpose – belief (20:30-31)
5. No parables or casting out of demons

Do you have a
picture of Jesus?



Introduction to the Fourth Gospel

1. **Irenaeus** (c. A.D. 130-200): “John, the disciple of the Lord, who leaned on his breast, also published the Gospel while living at Ephesus in Asia” (*Haer.* 3.1.1; quoted in Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 5.8.4.)
2. **Clement of Alexandria** (c. A.D. 155-220) made the famous assertion that after Matthew, Mark, and Luke had been written, “John, perceiving that the bodily facts had been made plain in the Gospels, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual gospel” (Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.7).
3. **Origen** (c. A.D. 185-254) regarded the Gospels as the “firstfruits of all Scripture” and the Gospel of John as the “firstfruits of the Gospels.”
4. “**John Calvin** (1509-1564) . . . observes that the Synoptic Gospels allow us to see the ‘body of Jesus,’ whereas John reveals the ‘soul of Jesus.’” (Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, 192)
5. R. Alan Culpepper observes in the introduction of his commentary on John in the *Interpreting Biblical Texts* series, “John is arguably the **most influential book** of the New Testament” (page 13).
6. **What John does not have:** “In John we do not find parables, demon exorcisms; healing of lepers; tax collectors; Sadducees; table fellowship with sinners; infancy narratives; the temptation of Jesus; the Transfiguration; the material in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount; or the institution of the Lord’ Supper” (M. M. Thompson, “Gospel of John” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 374).
7. **What John does have:** “Jesus’ baptismal ministry at the Jordan; the encounters with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman; the “I am” sayings, coupled with long discourses, most of the material in chapters 7-11, and 14-17; the footwashing; and Jesus’ conversation with Pilate. Of the Johannine miracles only the feeding of the five thousand is found in the other Gospels” (M. M. Thompson, “Gospel of John” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 374).
8. **Time:** The story line in the Synoptic Gospels could be compressed into a single year. John specifically mentions three different Passovers, giving us the perspective of a three-year public ministry.
9. **Place:** The Synoptics describe a single trip to Jerusalem. John describes a ministry that oscillates between Galilee and Judea.

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Session 2 – *The Big Picture and a Number of Smaller Ones*

The Big Picture:

1. **Purpose Statement:** “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31).
 - a. Evangelism? (“begin to believe” – *pisteusēte*)
 - b. Exhortation? (“go on believing” – *pistuēte*)
 - c. Probably both!

2. **Outline:**

C. H. Dodd, in *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, saw the following outline:

 - i. The Proem (chapter 1)
 - ii. The Book of Signs (chapters 2-12)
 - iii. The Book of the Passion (chapters 13-22) – Brown calls it “Book of Glory”
 - iv. Some consider chapter 22 as an epilogue

3. **Building Faith: A Sacred Mystery:** I have my Acts students write a reflection on the role that God, speakers, and their own will have played in their faith development (Acts 13:48; 14:1; 14:2).

4. **“We should stop *explaining* and start *proclaiming*.”** (Richard B. Hays, “The Materiality of John’s Symbolic World” in *Preaching John’s Gospel: The World it Imagines*, 8). The endless quest for the “key” to understanding the Gospel of John can keep us from proclaiming the Gospel as we should.

A Number of Smaller Pictures: (Some regard one of these themes as the key to understanding all of the Gospel of John. Perhaps they are better viewed as different windows that let light into the “chapel” of John’s Gospel.)

1. **Above and below:** This “cosmological dualism” is regarded by Holladay as the essence of John’s “theological vision” (Holladay, 206). It is clearly seen in 3:31-36.

2. **Yes-or-no world:** John doesn't contain shades of gray. You are either in or out, either for or against, either standing in the light or hiding in the darkness (John 9).
3. **Incarnation:** Culpepper (71) quotes Bultmann as saying, "The theme of the whole Gospel of John is the statement: 'The word became flesh.'"
4. **Boldly confessing your faith:** The word *aposunagōgos* appears 3 times in John: 9:22; 12:42; 16:2. The man born blind and Nicodemus are two excellent examples of the challenge to boldly confess one's faith. (Emphasis in David Rensberger, *Joannine Faith and Liberating Community*)
5. **Signs and faith:** There are seven "signs" in the Gospel of John:
 - i. Turning water into wine (2:1-12)
 - ii. Healing the official's son (4:46-54)
 - iii. Healing the lame man on the Sabbath (5:1-18)
 - iv. Feeding the 5,000 (6:1-15)
 - v. Walking on the water (6:16-21)
 - vi. Healing the man born blind (Chapter 9)
 - vii. Raising Lazarus (11:1-44)
6. **Signs and words:** Tom H. Olbricht has an excellent chapter on "The Word as Sign" in *Preaching John's Gospel*, edited by David Fler and Dave Bland. He states, "Both the words *and* works of Jesus are signs" (84). Nathaniel is a good example of this (1:48-49). Mark Frost has a powerful story along this line in *Preaching John's Gospel* regarding "Mrs. Butler, Hayes Avenue Church of Christ, Detroit, Michigan" (104).
7. **Glory:** "Glorify" appears 23 times in John, and "glory" appears 18 times. Leon Morris, in the *New International Commentary* on the Gospel of John, writes that John "may have found it difficult to find a place for the Transfiguration (which concentrates the manifestation of Jesus' glory into one magnificent story) in the face of the fact that one of his major themes is that Jesus' glory was manifested continually in the path of lowly service, and that it was preeminently shown on the cross" (18).
8. **Invitation to join the journey of faith:** Like a figure in the bottom corner of a Norman Rockwell painting, Nicodemus (3:1ff; 7:50ff; 19:39ff) and the Samaritans (4:39-42) invite us into the story of the Gospel of John and point the way forward.

9. **Christology:** Unlike the Synoptic Gospels where the identity of Jesus as the Messiah is slowly revealed, in the Gospel of John Jesus is identified with messianic titles six times in chapter one alone. This is also expressed in the seven “I am” sayings which echo the *egō eimi* from the LXX translation of Exodus 3:14. Holladay lists them as follows on page 196:
- Living water (4:14);
 - Bread of life (6:35);
 - The light of the world (8:12);
 - The gate for the sheep & the good shepherd (10:7, 11);
 - The resurrection and the life (11:25);
 - The way, truth, and life (14:6); and
 - The true vine (15:1)
10. **Friendship:** Gail O’Day has an insightful (though perhaps overstated) chapter on “Friendship as the Theological Center of the Gospel of John” in *Preaching John’s Gospel*. She contrasts the soft, fluffy sentiment surrounding friendship today with the values of true friendship in the Greek world. The two central components of true friendship, she maintains, were “the gift of one’s life for one’s friends and the use of frank and open speech” (36). This is seen in 15:13 and 16:25-33.
11. **Eternal life:** In the Gospel of John, eternal life is seen as both future and present. It is a very realized eschatology as future hope is brought into present experience (3:15-16; 6:40, 54; 5:24; 3:36; 4:14; 6:47, 54; 12:50; 17:2-3).



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Session 3 – One Preacher’s Experience in Preaching John’s Gospel

For fourteen years, between 1991 and 2005, I preached for the College Church of Christ in Searcy, Arkansas. Because of the rich preaching heritage of that congregation, I was blessed with the freedom to spend an entire year in 1994-1995 preaching through the Gospel of John. It was perhaps the most life-shaping experience of all my years in preaching. To this day, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the College Church for their trust and patience with me throughout the journey of preaching the Gospel of John. The following is how I describe those twelve months :

1. Exhausting – profoundly simple language often loaded with unfathomable concepts
2. Exhilarating – a sense of “walking with Jesus” through the entire experience
3. Dangerous – unbelief is a very real possibility when one’s faith is examined

4. Surprising – many times what I found was not what I expected to find
5. Confrontational – Jesus was often almost embarrassingly confrontational (Nicodemus, Samaritan Woman, etc.)
6. Confusing – several texts were impossible for me to organize or even grasp
7. Comforting – a very difficult year of life took place while I preached through John
8. Real – no greater endorsement today than to be real – the story of Jesus and the first believers “rings true” to this day
9. Universal – there is a powerful message for every believer, from the very weakest to the very strongest
10. Affirming – It’s true! It’s really true!

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