

The Gospel of John

Session One - Introduction



Course Outline
Composition and Sources
Hints for Reading John

Gospel of John Study – Course Outline

- Introduction (Chapter 1)***
- Session 1: *Introduction to the Gospel of John*
Session 2: *John 1:1 - 18 LOGOS (The Prologue)*
- The Book of Signs (Chapter 2 - 12)***
- Session 3: *John 1:19 – 3:21 Jesus' Epiphany and Encounters*
Session 4: *Joh 3:22 – 5:47 Increasing Opposition to Jesus*
Session 5: *John 6:1 - 71 The Bread of Life*
Session 6: *John 7:1 – 9:41 The Festival of Booths*
Session 7: *John 10:1 – 11:47 The Shepherd at the Gate and the Raising of Lazarus*
- The Book of Passion (Chapter 13 - 20)***
- Session 8: *John 12:1 – 13:38 The Conclusion of Jesus Public Ministry*
Session 9: *John 14:1 – 16:33 Jesus' Farewell to His Disciples*
Session 10: *John 17:1 – 18:12 The Passion Narrative*
Session 11: *John 18:13 – 19:42 The Passion Narrative – Continued*
- Epilogue (Chapter 21)***
- Session 12: *John 20:1 – 21:25 The Resurrection Narratives*

Composition and Sources

There are reasons for thinking that the Gospel of John once existed in an earlier, probably briefer, form and has been edited, augmented, and perhaps rearranged. Moreover, its obvious similarities to the Synoptics, as well as differences, raise the question of whether John knew and used them. If not, what were his sources?

While the overall structure of the Fourth Gospel is quite clear, and individual episodes are carefully crafted, connections between episodes are sometimes lacking at best or problematic at worst. There is reason to suspect that an earlier form of the Gospel was augmented and rearranged, even if in the nature of the case it is impossible to prove it.

Perhaps it will be useful to indicate in a preliminary way at least three, and possibly four, stages and settings embedded in the canonical text of the Gospel of John. There may well be a correlation between the stages of composition and these settings. There was, first of all, the stage of Jesus' historic ministry, represented by the accounts of Jesus' miracles and his death. Certainly Jesus was a healer, a miracle worker, who died at the hands of the Roman authorities, probably with the complicity of certain chief priests. John takes quite seriously the earthly ministry of Jesus, culminating in his death. A collection of miracle stories and a narrative of Jesus' passion may point back to this stage. Second, there was apparently a stage of conflict within the synagogue between Jesus' followers and those who rejected his claims, which would be represented by the arguments between Jesus and "the Jews," particularly during his public ministry. As comparison with the synoptic tradition also shows, these discussions probably represent a stage and setting after the historic ministry of Jesus himself. Third, there was a stage, after a split from the synagogue and Judaism, during which distinctly Christian theological issues arose. This stage is represented in the farewell discourses, Jesus' departing prayer, as well as the resurrection scenes. This leads to the question of whether one may identify a fourth stage, which would be a further Christian stage, reflected in the epilogue (John 21) the Johannine Epistles, perhaps in part of the farewell discourses and the prayer (chapters 15 – 17), and even in the prologue. The problem in identifying such a stage and setting lies in finding adequate criteria to distinguish it from the third stage. Yet the theological interests of these last-named sections or items do not entirely coincide, although they are not contradictory.

– D. Moody Smith (*John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

Some Things to Notice as You Go: Tips for Reading

1. Pay attention to the special repetitive vocabulary, such as light and darkness, life, truth, world, word, witness, testify, and family language (children, birth, womb, father, mother).
2. A key feature of the Fourth Gospel is the "I am" statements. You need to know from the start that there are two kinds of "I am" statements in John. First, there are the "I am" statements followed by a predicate nominative, such as "I am the bread of life," or "I am the light of the world." Second, there are the absolute "I am" statements, where Jesus says only "I am," playing off God's own self-designation in the Old Testament as evidenced in Exodus 3:14.

3. Notice the extremely intimate personal encounters between Jesus and individual characters. Some of the characters we know only from John. Examples: Nathaniel (chapter 1), Nicodemus (chapter 3), the Samaritan woman (chapter 4).
4. John could be called the “Gospel of intimate, touchy relationships”; there is no more intimate book in the Bible than the Gospel of John. Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit and we are all intimately related to one another. It is a very touchy Gospel; John rubs mud on the blind man’s eyes; Mary anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair, Jesus washes the disciples’ dirty feet.
5. If you are familiar with the Synoptic Gospels, you may think of Peter as the “star” of the disciples. In John, it is the Beloved Disciple (“the one whom Jesus loved” in the NRSV.) The text never names the disciple.
6. The Fourth Gospel expresses a conflicted relationship with the world. On the one hand, there is no doubt that God and Jesus created the world and that they aim to save it (3:16 – 17). On the other hand, the world “hates” Jesus, and his disciples should anticipate the same experience (15:18 – 19).
7. Every intimate personal encounter with Jesus has the power to transform us, but that transformation is *always* worked out in the context of community. There is no “Lone Ranger” Christianity in John.
8. John is a narrative, not a newspaper account. Respect it as such.
9. John is quite different from the Synoptic Gospels. Do not try to “fix” John by imposing their narrative or theology upon John.
10. It is quite useful to read one character in light of other characters. I call this Intercharacterization. So read the Samaritan woman in contrast to and comparison with *both* Nicodemus, who precedes her, and the disciples, who show up after her encounter with Jesus.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

Primary Sources:

John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, by D. Moody Smith, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999

Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel
by Jamie Clark-Soles, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY,
2016

The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic by John Shelby Spong, Harper One, New York, 2013