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Resource Reading Guide: The Gospel of John

By Ronald L. Tyler

The fourth gospel has been likened to an eagle since its portrait of Jesus flies so high. Hence, few New Testament writings have had so many articles, commentaries and books published on it. The following suggestions are but a small selection.

Three Main Problems

Before exploring the relevant secondary literature, the reader needs to be aware of three major problems in studying the fourth gospel. The first is the question of "historicity" and the second is the connected issue of the "symbolism" of the fourth gospel. How much really happened as described and how much symbolism does one draw from the book? The third difficulty concerns the community being addressed. Certain contemporary scholars have reconstructed the group being addressed and then interpreted the gospel in light of this. While the audience addressed is always the central background feature, some of these reconstructions are highly speculative.

Orientation

For a quick orientation to recent study of the fourth gospel, Gerard S. Sloyan, **What Are They Saying About John?** (1991), is excellent. Sloyan mentions the "landmark" commentaries, the study for sources, and the religious and theological nature of the fourth gospel. The latter will be found most serviceable by students.

Robert Kysar's article on the gospel of John in the recent **Anchor Bible Dictionary**, volume 3

(1992), is outstanding since Kysar reflects a digest of his lifetime of study in the history of research in the fourth gospel.

A. M. Hunter's **According to John: The New Look at the Fourth Gospel** (1968), though in need of updating, does a fine job of popularizing the issues and showing how many recent scholars view the fourth gospel quite differently than scholars in previous generations by taking the historicity of the fourth gospel much more seriously. His subtitle accurately describes what Hunter does with the "New Look" of the fourth gospel.

M. M. Thompson has an up-to-date article on the Gospel of John in the recent **Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels** (1992). It treats origin, structure, genre, character and theology of the fourth gospel and appends a fine bibliography.

Martin Hengel's small volume, **The Johannine Question** (1989), is a superb entry into the world of Johannine scholarship and its introductory questions. It is a non-technical summation highly recommended for its brevity and clarity.

Commentaries on the Greek Text

There is a masterpiece by C. K. Barrett, **The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction With Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text**, revised edition (1978). It is a clearly written theological commentary making it especially useful for the preacher and teacher. Barrett is not caught up in many of the modern literary and historical reconstructions of the fourth gospel and is, correctly,

skeptical about many of them. Even if you cannot read Greek, it is still possible to find the texts in which you are interested and discover much relevant material.

Marcus Dods in **The Expositor's Greek Testament**, 5 volumes, remains useful. Dods is always a good writer whose practical suggestions can be utilized by an alert student. The editor, Sir W. R. Nicoll, did an admirable job of selecting scholars and having them comment on the grammar and syntax of the Greek. James Denney's contribution on Romans remains one of the best critical works ever done on that book. Although these volumes on the New Testament were done years ago, they provide a solid nucleus for New Testament study. They are available in reprint and can often be found used.

Alfred Plummer did the analysis of the fourth gospel in the old **Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges** (1893). Characteristic of that series is that when there is a controversy of interpretation, various options are listed. Plummer gives a careful interpretation based on the Greek text.

One other work based on the Greek text deserves mentioning. It is the exhaustive two-volume contribution of J. H. Bernard to the **International Critical Commentary** (1923) and is one of the better works of that series. Bernard is always worth checking on difficult texts or problems.

Commentaries on the English Text Older Classics

B. F. Westcott stands out; although written in 1908, it remains an outstanding example of classical exegesis. Westcott wrote a commentary on both the English and Greek texts but the notes are the same. Although his introduction is terribly dated today, his comments on the text remain insightful. His outline analysis of the fourth gospel is timelessly useful as are many of the "additional notes" scattered throughout the book.

Another older work, but one that is a masterful example of theological exegesis, is **The Fourth Gospel** by E. Hoskyns and his pupil F. N. Davey (1947). Even though written prior to the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls, I know of no more helpful volume for the preacher or teacher. The eight "detached notes" are solidly helpful, often suggesting a core for sermon study. Hoskyns was a great Cambridge scholar, and his book is the greatest of the English commentaries after Westcott.

One other classic work deserves mention. It is the commentary by F. Godet (1885). Godet's commentary is rich in spiritual penetration going to the heart of each passage. He writes so clearly and to the point that all his commentaries remain valuable

even though one must ignore all his material relating to textual criticism since it is over one hundred years old.

Modern

This is the age of the "mega-commentary" of which there are two outstanding examples. The first is the two-volume work of R. E. Brown in the Anchor Bible series (1966-71). It is an outstanding student's commentary because it is clearly written and mentions most bibliographical materials of primary importance (to its date). Its notes and cross references are encyclopedic. However, it is a massive work and can discourage even the most serious student. I have some concern with his interpretation of much of the religious symbolism and his five stages of development of the present form of the book. Brown lacks the theological genius of Hoskyns.

The other large work, and superior in my judgment to Brown, is the three volume work of R. Schnackenburg (1968-1987), translated from German. The German original now has a fourth volume that updates the earlier volumes. Here is a balanced critical work on the fourth gospel resulting in some 1700 pages of interpretation. It expresses many practical concerns and is the serious student's commentary.

There are two current leading "conservative" commentaries on the fourth gospel. One is Leon Morris in the **New International Commentary** series (1971). It is a large work of 936 pages which has recently been revised. While helpful, there are many theological and historical issues that are not treated with any real depth. Donald A. Carson's *The Gospel According to John* (1991) is the other leading "conservative" treatment of the fourth gospel. Its 714 pages are filled with careful textual comments and its introduction (pp. 21-108) is current. It is the better of the "conservative" works available today. He is in conversation with contemporary scholarship.

The best general reader's commentary on John is George Beasley-Murray's contribution to the **Word Biblical Commentary** (1987). I require this one of students in my own course on the fourth gospel. Beasley-Murray does not break any new ground, but the commentary is a solid study of the text of the fourth gospel, is theologically sensitive and has a thorough introduction.

A fine moderate handbook on the fourth gospel is the contribution of B. Lindars to the **The New Century Bible** series (1981). It is a concisely written work which suggests that the fourth gospel emerged as a series of sermon notes. I have used it as a text with students and it works well.

Ray Summers's **Behold the Lamb: An Exposition of the Theological Themes in the Gospel of John** (1979) is 300 pages of popularly written material that always informs the serious student. Ministers should be especially aware of this book.

Frank Pack wrote an extremely useful two-volume commentary in **The Living Word Commentary** (1975-77). It is filled with comments verse by verse without technical footnotes cluttering the text.

The older study (1952) by A. J. Gossip and W. F. Howard in **The Interpreter's Bible** volume 8 is one of the better volumes of that series. Here the exegesis (Howard) and the exposition (Gossip) are both generally solid, which is unusual in this series.

Smaller Volumes

R. Tasker's contribution to the **Tyndale Commentary** series (1969) is clear, brief and directly to the point of the text. It may not provide enough information for many and will need to be supplemented with some of the larger works but is a fine point of departure, as is A. M. Hunter's small contribution to **The Cambridge Bible Commentary** (1965). Floyd Filson's brief treatment in **The Layman's Bible Commentary** volume 19 (1963) is another good entry into the study of the fourth gospel.

F. F. Bruce (1983) did a popular treatment of the fourth gospel that vies for the best of the smaller volumes. His 424 pages contain vintage exposition though Bruce doesn't directly talk about critical problems. However, the informed student will know these issues are in the background as Bruce writes.

Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe have edited **The Women's Bible Commentary** (1992). The treatment of the fourth gospel is done by Gail O'Day who is an Associate Professor of Biblical Preaching at Emory. She, as characteristic of the commentary, treats those passages that are especially about women. This is important for the role that women play in the fourth gospel, especially in the resurrection narratives. I recommend it highly for information that you will not usually find elsewhere. B. F. Westcott in his **The Revelation of the Risen Lord** (1902) recognized, years ago, the important role that women play in the resurrection narratives in John as the risen Lord revealed himself to them because of their deep love for him.

PHEME PERKINS' treatment in **The New Jerome Biblical Commentary** (1988) is one of the best brief and current treatments of the fourth gospel to be found. It is part of the finest one-volume commentary on the entire Bible currently available.

Special Studies

The study notes by Donald G. Miller in the **Oxford Annotated Bible: Revised Standard Version** (1962) are outstanding on both the fourth gospel and the Johannine epistles. Miller's structuring of the fourth gospel is convincing and highly recommended for an outline of the book.

Readings in St. John's Gospel (1961), by William Temple, is a classic for pulpit work. With similarities to Hoskyn's commentary, it is replete with theological insights. Although not a commentary in the traditional format, it is rich in insights for preaching. Temple's study is filled with practical comments and must be read by anyone teaching or preaching through the fourth gospel. Temple does, however, in places, take some extreme liberties with the text regarding its symbolism.

There are two small guides for preachers which many will find suggestive: D. Moody Smith, **John** (1976) in the **Proclamation Commentaries**, and F. Craddock, **John** in the **Knox Preaching Guides** (1980). Both must be supplemented by larger books, but these are aimed at preaching from the fourth gospel. Craddock is the more helpful of the two probably because he is a professor of preaching.

William Morris' **Studies in the Fourth Gospel** (1969) is dated now but does take up discussion of some important issues such as history and theology in the fourth gospel and the Dead Sea Scrolls in relation to the fourth gospel.

Robert Kysar in **The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel** (1975), traces the history of the study of the fourth gospel. His **John: The Maverick Gospel** (1976) is a theological study of some major themes in the fourth gospel and helpful to the preacher/teacher. His **John's Story of Jesus** (1984) attempts to tell the story line of the fourth gospel in some 96 pages and will be very suggestive to the alert reader.

Kyle M. Yates, **Preaching from John's Gospel** (1964), can be useful to the preacher when supplemented by some of the commentaries.

Suzanne de Dietrich did a series of meditations on the Gospel of John entitled, **And He Is Lifted Up** (1969), that I recommend to one who has carefully studied the fourth gospel and is looking for reflective meaning and help for preaching or personal devotion.

Gerard Sloyan, **John** in the Interpretation series (1988), is helpful because he includes a section entitled "Preaching On..." with each major section after his exposition of the passage.

Charles Talbert's **Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles** (1992) does

not serve as well as his previous study of Luke's gospel but is filled with helpful insights from the point of view of the literary and theological structure of the fourth gospel. He guides the serious student to ancient primary texts from the classical and Jewish world.

Since the fourth gospel gives so much of its space to the passion narrative of Jesus' last week, Raymond Brown's **The Death of the Messiah** in two volumes (1994) deserves pride of place. Here are over 1600 pages of exposition on the passion narratives in all four gospels. There is nothing so complete for the very serious student.

Theology of the Fourth Gospel

The theology of the fourth gospel is discussed by John Painter, **John: Witness & Theologian** (1975), whose book constantly addresses the Christian life. The older work by W. F. Howard, **Christianity According to St. John** (1943), while it is pre-Dead Sea Scrolls, remains essential for theological study. R. H. Lightfoot's **St. John's Gospel** (1956) is a theological commentary definitely worth consulting.

James Priest edited a series of studies honoring Dr. Frank Pack, **Johannine Studies: Essays in Honor of Frank Pack** (1989). Many of the articles in this volume will be of important service to students by giving overviews of topics in the fourth gospel, such as Tom Olbricht's "The Theology of the Signs in the Gospel of John."

A little known but outstanding book is Henry S. Holland's **The Philosophy of Faith and the Fourth Gospel** (1920) dealing mainly with technical issues. Published from notes taken by his students, it has one of the most satisfactory discussions on the relation of the fourth gospel to the synoptic gospels I have ever read. The discussion of believing in the fourth gospel is excellent. Because believing is the central theological concern of the fourth gospel, the value of Holland is clear.

Edwin Abbott's **Johannine Vocabulary** (1905) remains a marvelous source of study for the theology of the book. Abbott tries to compare the Johannine vocabulary with that of the other three gospels. The book is old, part of a set of two volumes, and accessible mainly in libraries.

The Man Born to Be King (1943) by Dorothy Sayers, is a challenging series of plays, which were originally on British radio, portraying the fourth gospel's picture of Jesus. In twelve scenes, she tells the story of Jesus through various characters. You will come to appreciate better the apostle Matthew and other disciples. She is generally true to the fourth gospel and is conversant with scholarship of the time of her writing. The book serves well for private or small group study.

There are two absolutely indispensable books by James Denney, not only for the fourth gospel, but for the theological study of the New Testament. The first is **The Death of Christ** (1903) in which Denney studies all the passages in the New Testament relating to Christ's death. There are over 40 pages given to the Johannine writings. The second is **Jesus and the Gospel** (1909) wherein Denney covers the theology of the fourth gospel in 16 pages. Do not be fooled by the seeming brevity of these pages since Denney fills his writings with content.

One of the latest books on the thought of the fourth gospel is Craig Koester's **Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community** (1995). It is current and written for a general audience.

The words at the close of the fourth gospel can apply to the embarrassment of riches available to study this gospel. Were one to try to list them all "I suppose the world itself could not contain the books..."

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