

The Gospel of John: Context & Study Questions
Hum 110, Reed College
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Cultural Context: This Gospel probably originated in Asia Minor, possibly at Ephesus, shortly before the end of the first century. Who within the Roman Empire do you think is John's primary audience and why?

Structure. The Gospel of John is often divided into four parts: a Prologue (1.1-1.18), the "Book of Signs" (1.19-12.50), the "Book of Glory" (13.1-20.31), and the Epilogue (ch. 21). What does the Prologue suggest will be the main focus of the Gospel? (The Oxford Study Bible explains that "a 'sign' is an act of power by Jesus which points to an truth inaccessible to sight and touch, but apprehensible by faith. Paradoxically, 'glory,' an Old Testament term signifying God's presence, is for the evangelist publicly manifest in the earthly career of Jesus--who, to eyes of faith, reveals himself as the Son of God in certain significant events and through his death and resurrection" [108].) How does this help explain the differences between the "Book of Signs" and the "Book of Glory"? What is the function of the epilogue?

Theology/Biblical History: The Gospel of John (the "spiritual gospel") is substantially different from the three Synoptic Gospels (Luke, Mark, Matthew--synoptic means "presenting or taking the same or common view"). There have been many attempts to account for these differences. Biblical Scholar Frank Kermode notes that "earlier in the present century there were those who strongly believed John to have been related to a particular form of Gnosticism, the Mandaean. This belief was abandoned after the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, which were the work of Jewish writers before the time of John, and which anticipated some of his characteristic imagery and habits of thought" (*The Literary Guide to the Bible* 440). How does John differ in style and content from the Synoptic Gospels (i.e. Matthew)? How does it differ structurally? Four common aspects of the synoptic gospels are

1. narrative in general (i.e. the storyline--the Gnostic gospels are mainly parables and sayings)
2. the scene of temptation in the wilderness
3. the story of the demonic Gerasa (Matt. 8:23-34)
4. the Passion narrative (final section of the Gospel when Christ is crucified)

Which of these aspects are in John and how much room do they get? What is the central unifying aspect of the gospel? What parallels do you find between John and the Hebrew texts we have read in this class?

Gnosticism. The "Gnostic Gospels" (to which John has been compared) were discovered in 1945/46 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Gnosticism was the creed practiced by various cults during late pre-Christian and early Christian centuries. Gnostics believed that matter is evil and that emancipation from evil and the material world comes through gnosis (esoteric knowledge of spiritual truth). Why might earlier critics have thought that John was part of a Gnostic tradition?

Literary Questions: How is the character of Jesus different from the Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels? What role do miracles play in this characterization of Jesus? Who is the narrator of this gospel? How does he present himself? How does this influence our reading of the text? What sorts of images and symbols does this narrator favor? How would you characterize the God of this story? Who does he favor?

Bibliography

Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.

Turner, John. *Book of Thomas the Contender*. Miissoula: Scholars Press, 1975.