

“As a member of the laity in the Christian church, I have always had trouble with the concept of just reading the latest translation of the Bible and instinctively understanding it. Therefore, I have relied on individuals such as William Barclay, N.T. Wright, and C.S. Lewis to provide the necessary historical research, contextual perspective, and translation of Hebrew and Greek words to help me better understand the Bible. Sherrill Stevens’ *A Study Companion on the Gospel of John* follows in the tradition of these giants, exploring the scripture in ways that lead to a deeper understanding of the scripture and, at times, challenging readers to think beyond what they have learned previously in Sunday School or Bible study. Nearly half a century of learning and studying scripture echo in the words of Dr. Stevens as he leads readers through the Gospel of John, taking time to explain the nuances of the text while also tying in the big picture by referencing other scriptural passages. The genius of Dr. Stevens is that he does not let his intellectual analysis of the scripture overshadow the feeling of love and adoration with which he approaches his study of the life of Jesus. I am grateful that Dr. Stevens’ heart of servitude has led to this compilation of his life-long study of scripture.”

*Lance Rogers
Mt. Sylvan United Methodist Church
Durham, North Carolina*

“As a lay teacher of an adult Sunday School class, I have to ‘keep on my toes.’ In the beginning, I read the scripture lessons, studied it, and took notes. We had class discussions that stimulated more interest and more study. Bible dictionaries and different Bible translations came next. Then, I discovered Bible commentaries. Dr. Stevens’ book on the Gospel of John is comprehensive in its scope; it is more than a commentary. The political, historical, and especially spiritual aspects of his work have resulted in some thinking and rethinking, inviting and maybe challenging us to do more Bible study—which I call a good thing!”

*Pam Mentz
Black Creek Baptist Church
Mechanicsville, Virginia*

“Sherrill Stevens brings many years of biblical study experience to this wonderful new commentary on the Gospel of John. It is well organized and researched, succinctly written, and promises to be helpful to clergy and laity alike.”

*Glenn Jonas
Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Charles Howard Professor of Religion
Campbell University*

“Sherrill Stevens’ work on the Gospel of John is both a worthy effort and a wonderful tool in the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. I found *A Study Companion on the Gospel of John: Exposition, Interpretation, and Commentary* to be exactly what the title promises. While Stevens provides an excellent recounting of the events and teachings of the gospel in his exposition material, it was in the interpretation and commentary sections that I found the greatest blessing. He challenges the easy, traditional reading and re-reading of John with several novel suggestions. Whether or not one agrees with his conclusions, even nontraditional conclusions are presented in a gracious way that invites intellectual and spiritual conversation with the text. This book is a blessing in the ways it invites an expanded reflection on the Gospel of John.”

Alan Ray
Senior Pastor, Ridge Baptist Church
Richmond, Virginia

“In this commentary, Dr. Stevens provides the reader with sound biblical exegesis and exposition, thoughtful devotional insights, and practical implications on the Gospel of John. I recommend this volume written by one who not only studies the New Testament, but also lives by its words and wisdom.”

Marion D. Lark
Retired Minister
Henderson, North Carolina

A Study Companion on the Gospel of John

EXPOSITION, INTERPRETATION, AND COMMENTARY

Sherrill Gardner Stevens

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Dedication

To Marguerite,
Faithful Christian
Lifelong Soulmate

Introduction

There are no documents that have been more influential in the culture of Western civilization than the four Gospels of the Christian New Testament. Each gospel has features that make it unique and distinctive.

- Matthew and Luke have the lovely but different nativity stories.
- Matthew has the incomparable collection of teachings called the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of parables of the Kingdom, and the global Great Commission in the concluding verses of the final chapter.
- Mark has the unique position of being the first written, and of being most simply a narrative account of where Jesus goes and what he does.
- Luke is the most universal, focusing on the compassion of Jesus for the underprivileged and outcasts of society, and the inclusion of all people along with the Israelites—in the embrace of God’s outreach to mankind.
- John has major differences from the Synoptics, in what it includes and does not include, and in the way it treats both events and teachings.

The Fourth Gospel is anonymous in the text. According to tradition, the writer is the apostle John, son of Zebedee and brother of James, and his identity is suggested by the reference to “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” That authorship has been widely questioned among contemporary interpreters, however. The dating for the writing varies by different researchers from CE 90 to CE 150. Even at CE 90 the apostle would have been of advanced age well beyond the normal life expectancy in that time. The question of time and authorship is made more involved by the tradition that the author of the gospel is also the author of the three Johannine epistles and the apocalypse in the Book of Revelation.

The traditions about authorship and place of writing include that the apostle John in his last years lived and preached in Ephesus and that he was the John exiled on the isle of Patmos, probably during the Domitian persecution of Christians in that area during the decade of the 90s CE (Rev. 1:9). It is widely believed that there was also a John the Elder who lived and actively served in the area of Ephesus during that same period. Some interpreters have used the identification of the writer of the second and third Johannine epistles as “the elder” to indicate that John the Elder wrote all five of the Johannine documents.

Two characteristics of the Fourth Gospel seem to favor the apostle as its writer. One, there are many references to first-person kinds of information and details about daily incidents in the life of Jesus. Two, much of the emphasis, in descriptions of what Jesus does and in interpretation of what he teaches, focuses on the meaning of his actions and teachings. That emphasis on details indicates first-person familiarity. Personal involvement is also indicated by the writer's use of the concept of "signs" to indicate that the act or the teaching is a clear reflection of Jesus' identity and the nature of his mission in incarnation.

References found among writings by early church fathers describe this gospel as being a product of the two Johns, both apostle and elder, or some associates of the apostle, or possibly even someone with help from the congregation of the Ephesian church. Taking all these involved factors into account, William Barclay sets forth a convincing possibility in the introduction to his popular and helpful commentary on this John.¹

Barclay suggests that the aged apostle provided the information and insights recorded in the gospel, and that John the Elder, or their younger associates or assistants, actually wrote the document. Among other things, this helps solve the problem of the apostle's possibly boastful reference to himself as the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (i.e., "I" was his favorite); that is, if the reference is made by others in admiration of the devotion and faithfulness of the aged saint.

So, we have before us this magnificent document. It is the most loved, most quoted, and most often read by many Christians. The writer clearly declares his purpose in writing: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). This gospel is an avowedly theological writing. In it we find many great concepts about the nature and character of God, the reason for God's self-revelation in incarnation, the dynamic meaning of God's ever-present inspiration and guidance in human life, and the undergirding grace that gives assured hope about eternal life. These concepts are so infinitely awesome that they are often beyond the capacity of finite minds to grasp, but they richly inform and deeply bless Christians who are enabled by enlightenment and grace to simply trust God.

NOTE

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, vol. 1* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), xxxix-xli.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The biblical text is not printed. This is done with intent that this volume will be a companion for Bible study. The author believes that reading the text from a personal Bible, followed by considering the interpretation and commentary herein, will make this volume most helpful.

In the chapters that follow, the author's writing is divided into three sections:

1. Exposition (study or discussion of the biblical text; appears in regular text font)
2. Interpretation (analysis or background on the biblical text; appears in bold type)
3. *Commentary* (editorial or application of the biblical text; appears in italics)

OUTLINE OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

- Chapter 1: From Creation to Incarnation
- Chapter 2: Jesus Becomes Publicly Active
- Chapter 3: New Life and God's Love
- Chapter 4: The Nature of God and Worship
- Chapter 5: A Healing and Discourse on Identity
- Chapter 6: Loaves, Fishes, and the Bread of Life
- Chapter 7: Controversy: Who Is This Jesus?
- Chapter 8: Light, and Who Sees It
- Chapter 9: Who Are the Really Blind?
- Chapter 10: Shepherds, Gates, and Folds
- Chapter 11: Truth and Power Collide
- Chapter 12: Coming to Jerusalem
- Chapter 13: "As I Have Done to You"
- Chapter 14: Promise of Ongoing Presence
- Chapter 15: Fruitful Life, Witnessed by Love
- Chapter 16: Counsel Before Departure
- Chapter 17: Divine Intercession
- Chapter 18: Evil Designs in Progress
- Chapter 19: Corrupt Power Seems to Win
- Chapter 20: God, Good, and Life Are Triumphant
- Chapter 21: Love Me, Feed My Lambs