

Introduction to the Gospel of John

Part 2: Historical and Textual Matters

Dr. David Turner | Session 2

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

authorship, external evidence, internal evidence, audience, Synoptic Gospels, geography, textual criticism, Papyrus 52, pericope adulterae

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. David Turner examines the historical and textual foundations of the Gospel of John. He explores issues of authorship and audience, highlighting how both external and internal evidence connect the text to the Apostle John and a wide Christian audience. He contrasts John's narrative and geographical structure with the Synoptic Gospels, explaining why early church fathers labeled it a 'spiritual gospel'. Finally, Turner introduces textual criticism, illustrating its importance using major textual variants like the prologue's wording, the Bethesda pool description, and the story of the adulterous woman.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Lecture

- A. Welcome and orientation to Session 2 (Introduction Part 2)
 - 1. Previous session focused on theological and literary aspects
 - 2. Current session focuses on historical and textual matters
- B. Limitations and scope of the introduction
 - 1. Inability to cover everything (allusion to John 21:25)
 - 2. Aim to introduce essential concepts
- C. Key overall resource on historical matters
 - 1. Craig Blomberg's The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel

II. Authorship of the Gospel of John

- A. External Evidence (2nd century and onwards)
 - 1. Early Church figures: Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Papias (cited in Eusebius' 4th-century history)
 - 2. Geographical connection: Association of John's late life and ministry with Ephesus in Western Asia Minor

3. The Papias problem: Distinguishing between "John the disciple" and "John the Elder"
 - a. *Exegetical debate over whether Papias referred to one or two distinct individuals*
 - b. *Turner's view: Gospel is at least indirectly tied to the Apostle John (one of the Twelve)*

B. Internal Evidence (evidence from the text itself)

1. Eyewitness claims ("we beheld his glory") indicating an original follower of Jesus
2. The Beloved Disciple
 - a. *Defined as a close personal associate of Jesus (reclined on Jesus' breast in the Roman triclinium arrangement)*
 - b. *Broad, cryptic, and qualified anonymity (oblique testimony in John 21:24-25)*
 - c. *Traditional and historical identification as John the Apostle*

III. Intended Audience of the Gospel of John

A. Redaction Criticism and the "Narrow Community" Theory

1. 20th-century trend: Gospels edited strictly for local, narrow communities
2. J. Louis Martin's synagogue exclusion theory
 - a. *Audience: Jewish Christians expelled from synagogues in the Diaspora*
 - b. *Textual support: Blind man healed (John 9), secret believers (John 12:42), prediction of synagogue expulsion (John 16:2)*

B. The "Wide Audience" counter-hypothesis

1. Richard Bauckham's The Gospels for All Christians
2. Critique of narrow theories as a circular argument and confirmation bias
3. Argument: Gospels were written for general circulation among all Christians; differences reflect authorial emphasis, not diverse localized audiences

C. Jewish Character of the Gospel

1. Deep Jewish roots with frequent Old Testament quotations and allusions (e.g., Prologue linking to Genesis 1, Moses, Malachi, and Isaiah 40)
2. Supplemental nature of John
 - a. *Dated late in the first century (around 90 CE)*
 - b. *Early dating theories (John A.T. Robinson, pre-70 CE) are generally rejected*
 - c. *Terminus ad quem (latest possible date) established by Papyrus 52 (P52, dated ~125 CE)*

IV. Relationship of John to the Synoptic Gospels

A. Geographic and Chronological Differences

1. Synoptics: Focus on Galilee, with a single climatic trip to Jerusalem at the end of Jesus' ministry
2. John: Jesus moves back and forth multiple times between Galilee and Jerusalem
3. Temple clearing incident placement
 - a. *Synoptics: At the end of Jesus' ministry*

b. John: At the beginning (Chapter 2)

c. Turner's view: Most scholars see this as a thematic, topical placement early on in John to show early conflict with Jewish leaders, rather than a second historical clearing

4. Chronology of ministry: John mentions three Passovers, establishing a three-year ministry (not apparent in Synoptics)

B. Extent of Overlap

1. Only about 10% of John is found in the Synoptic tradition (approx. 170 out of 778 verses)

2. Specific shared episodes:

a. John the Baptist's testimony

b. Clearing of the Temple

c. Healing of the official's son (John 4)

d. Feeding of the 5,000 (only miracle in all four Gospels)

e. Walking on water

f. Jewish leaders' plot to kill Jesus

g. Anointing at Bethany, Triumphal Entry, predicting Peter's denial, betrayal/arrest, trial before high priest/Pilate, crucifixion, burial, resurrection appearances

C. The "Spiritual Gospel" Designation

1. Clement of Alexandria's 2nd-century distinction (recorded by Eusebius): Synoptics set forth "outward/somatic" facts; John composed a "spiritual/pneumatic" gospel

2. Characteristics of a "spiritual" gospel in John:

a. High prologue starting with creation (Genesis 1)

b. Extensive use of metaphors and symbols (e.g., "born of water and Spirit" to Nicodemus, "living water" to the Samaritan woman, destroying "temple of his body")

c. Double meanings and spiritual misunderstandings by characters

V. Geography of John's Gospel

A. Layout of the Land

1. Core regions: Galilee (north), Samaria (middle), Judea (south)

2. Eastern orientation preference (Mediterranean Sea as frontier, Sea of Galilee north, Dead Sea south)

3. Distances: Relatively small region (approx. 50 miles between Nazareth and Jerusalem)

B. Topography of Jerusalem Sites in John

1. Pool of Bethesda (north of the Temple) and Pool of Siloam (southern end of the lower city)

2. Temple Mount, Fortress Antonia (northwest corner of Temple Mount), and Mount of Olives (east)

3. Bethany (east of the Mount of Olives)

4. Burial site: Protestant Gordon's Calvary (Garden Tomb) vs. Church of the Holy Sepulcher (more historically solid)

5. Trial site and the Via Dolorosa

- a. Traditional route starts at Fortress Antonia*
- b. Historical likelihood: Trial before Pilate was at Herod's Palace (south of the current Jaffa Gate), making the Via Dolorosa a more northerly trip*

VI. Textual History and Criticism

A. Major Manuscripts

1. Papyrus 52 (P52): Earliest New Testament scrap (~125 CE), containing John 18:31-33 (recto) and 18:37-38 (verso)
2. Papyrus 66 (P66): Near-complete Gospel manuscript (~200 CE), containing John 1:12-13 and utilizing shorthand for sacred names (nomina sacra)
3. Codex Vaticanus (~350 CE): A highly professional and ornate early Greek codex
4. Gutenberg Bible (1455 CE): Transition from hand-copied manuscripts to the printed era, starting with the Latin Vulgate ("In principio erat verbum")

VII. Three Major Textual Variants in John

A. John 1:18 — "Only Son" versus "Only God"

1. Reading options: monogenes uios (only son) vs. monogenes theos (only God)
2. External Evidence: Older manuscripts read "only God" (abbreviated Theta Sigma); later minuscules read "only son" (abbreviated Upsilon Sigma)
3. Internal Evidence:
 - a. "Only God" is a unique phrase (difficult reading) and better explains how the familiar "only son" arose as an intentional change*
 - b. Possibility of unintentional scribal error between the similar abbreviations*
4. Theological takeaway: Both readings affirm a high Christology and Jesus' divine status

B. John 5:3b-4 — The Angel Stirring the Pool

1. Textual issue: Omission of verse 4 in modern translations (e.g., NIV), which explains the Bethesda pool's healing properties as an angel stirring the waters
2. External Evidence: Omitted by the oldest manuscripts; present in a larger number of more recent manuscripts (which influenced the King James Version via the Textus Receptus)
3. Internal Evidence:
 - a. The large size of the deletion/addition suggests intentional manipulation, not an accident*
 - b. Theological critique: The idea of an angel stirring the pool and healing only the first person "fails the theological smell test," presenting a cruel and random method of healing contrary to biblical theology*
 - c. Likely origin: A scribe's marginal explanatory note that was eventually incorporated into the text of later copies*

C. John 7:53 - 8:11 — The Pericope of the Adulterous Woman (Pericope de Adultera)

1. Description: The story of the woman caught in adultery brought before Jesus to trap him
2. External Evidence:
 - a. *Omitted by the oldest, most reliable manuscripts*
 - b. *Included in later manuscripts (used by the King James Version via the Textus Receptus)*
 - c. *"Floating" character: Appears in different places in John or even in Luke in some manuscripts, and is often marked with marginal doubt indicators (obelisks) in others*
3. Internal and Literary Evidence:
 - a. *Vocabulary: Employs many words unique to this passage that are atypical for the rest of John*
 - b. *Literary interruption: Disrupts the flow of the narrative from the Feast of Booths (7:52) straight into Jesus' self-declaration "I am the light of the world" (8:12)*
4. Historical and Pastoral View:
 - a. *Despite lack of original Johannine authorship, the story perfectly captures Jesus' character (balancing grace and justice)*
 - b. *Highly likely to represent an authentic historical tradition of Jesus that circulated in the early church before being inserted into later copies of the Gospel*
 - c. *Practical advice: It should still be taught in the church, with awareness of its textual history*