

STUDY QUESTIONS

The Rev. Helen McPeak

In this intentional and creative exploration of the gospel of John, Cynthia Kittredge issues a broad welcome and invites her readers to claim a new perspective on such topics as the locus of authority, the role of women in Jesus' ministry and church, and the function of Scripture in the life of believers. Requesting of her readers wide minds capable of curiosity and close attention, Kittredge opens and explores this demanding, patient, and generous gospel that crosses over and includes while inviting relationship with a companion, advocate, and teacher.

Introduction

Before you begin, pray together for God's guidance and support in this study in which you are engaging.

- n What do you hope to learn?
- n Why do you engage it now?
- n How will you open yourself to be changed by what God will give?

Take time to read the whole of John in one sitting. (This may take several hours; relax and enjoy.)

- n What reads easily?
- n Where do you stumble?
- n Where do you find yourself distracted?
- n What do you like about this gospel?
- n With what do you struggle?

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Cynthia Kittredge begins her introduction by naming the “hair-raising rhetoric of hostility toward Jesus’ Jewish opponents” which has led some Christians to separate from, exclude, and judge their Jewish neighbors. (p. xv)

- n What do you make of this hostility?
- n What has been your experience with this separating, excluding, defining, demanding gospel?
- n Where have you met John before?

Look at Kittredge’s list of clues toward an expansive reading of John. (p. xvi)

- n Which of these pique your curiosity?
- n With which do you resonate as you seek the treasures John offers to our embattled world and divided churches?

Kittredge asserts that “interpreting the Scripture of our tradition transforms us and the world we serve.” (p. xvii)

- n For what transformation do you yearn?
- n How do the “freedom, conviction, and faith” which characterize an Anglican approach to the Bible equip you to affect this transformation?

Kittredge acknowledges a “trust in the Spirit and in the comprehensive strength of our common worship” as context for “our inquiring and analyzing and even playing with interpretations of sacred texts.” (p. xviii)

- n How do these trusts “encourage your own reading and wrestling with the gospel”?
- n Where have you encountered such an invitation before?
- n How were you taught to approach Scripture?
- n What guidance was offered you as you engaged holy writings?
By whom?
- n How is that serving you today?

Chapter One: John Among the Gospels, the Author(s) of John, John as History

Kittredge invites us to appreciate “the distinctiveness of John’s theological and artistic perspective and (to) view the difference from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as positive, creative tension.” (p. 1)

- n What difference does it make to have a variety of gospels?
- n What has been your experience with the prayer cited on page 1?

Revisit Kittredge’s description of the process of canonization on pages 2–4.

- n Is this new material for you? What further information do you need?
- n How does this knowledge of the evolution of the church’s understanding of John affect your own relationship to this gospel?
- n What freedoms result? What doubts undermine?

Kittredge raises the questions, “Is it OK that there is more than one version of the story of Jesus in the Bible? Does a variety of versions somehow undermine their claim to truth?” (p. 4)

- n What truths do you know in your own life?
- n How have these truths become established?
- n What are some examples of community-accepted truths that seem strong and clear? that seem misguided in your opinion?
- n What distinguishes between these?

Consider the differences that Kittredge notes between John and the other gospels. (See pp. 5–6.)

- n What are the advantages and disadvantages of multiple perspectives within the gospel canon?

Kittredge points out John’s explicit clarity of purpose: “The writing of the signs is designed to evoke belief, conversion, and transformation of those who read.” (p. 7)

- n What other texts do you know of that are as explicit about their purpose?
- n How do you respond to this stated goal?

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Kittredge writes, “In John to believe is to embrace God’s revelation in Christ. Believing is both relational and cognitive.” (p. 7)

- n Explore “belief.” Look it up in a dictionary.
- n Articulate some of your personal experiences of believing.
- n What role does belief play in your life?

Revisit Kittredge’s explorations of the endings of John. (pp. 7–9) She writes that the book “ends, instead of with conclusiveness, on a surprising note of openness.” (p. 8)

- n How does this strengthen or weaken the gospel in its purpose of evoking belief?
- n What effect does this open ending have on you?

Kittredge contrasts modern biblical scholars’ approach with patristic writers’ close identification of apostolic authorship with authority. (p. 9)

- n How does Kittredge’s explanation of the “composition history” of John satisfy you?
- n What is your own experience of the activity of the Spirit in studying your community’s history?

Further, Kittredge writes, “Those who cherished Jesus’ words and experienced them as giving life did not have the same idea as we do that Jesus said certain things and the words stayed the same forever.” (p. 12)

- n What would equip you to hold more loosely to the expressions of Jesus’ ministry?
- n What commentary on the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection might facilitate or support the evolution of understanding?
- n How do you like this concept of “a living history”?

Kittredge explains that John is a symbolically interpreted, life-giving, multi-layered gospel which uniquely acknowledges the existence of other traditions about Jesus’ deeds and signs. She says it works against the orthodox impulse for finishing and closing. (p. 14)

- n How do you respond to this innovative openness?
- n Explore some of the resources listed on page 15 on the issue of historicity and relationship with other gospels.

Chapter Two: Beginning at the Beginning: the Gospel Prologue

Kittredge states that the use of the prologue in liturgy indicates that it was a self-contained summary of the gospel, a hermeneutical key to the gospel. (p. 19)

- n How have you experienced this familiar passage of Scripture before this study?
- n What meaning has it carried for you?

Read the other Christological hymns in the New Testament which Kittredge suggests. (p. 20)

- n List the elements that the prologue has in common with these and watch for those elements as you proceed with this study.
- n How is your reading of John shaped by the knowledge that it opens with a corporate expression of gratitude to God?
- n How do you claim this liturgical and celebratory beginning for yourself?

Kittredge suggests a multi-layered history of composition for John which reflects a conversation in community over a period of time. (p. 21)

- n What tensions do you hear within the theological perspectives of the text?
- n What other examples can you think of that are the product of communal work over time? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

Diagram the chiasm which Kittredge explicates as reflecting the meaning of the prologue. (p. 22) Draw it out.

- n Refer to this graphic as you proceed with this chapter of the study, noting the emphases and balances.
- n Research the role of chiasms in Scripture. What function do they serve?

Revisit the openings of the three synoptic gospels.

- n What emphases do you find there?
- n How do they differ from John?
- n Where do you find specific details? divine communication? clear narratives? ancient prophecies? transcendent perspectives?
- n Do you resonate with any particular presentation? Why?

Kittredge cites scholars of religion, “early Christians found in the Jewish myth of Wisdom as creative force and mediator between God and human a compelling way to understand Jesus’ ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection.” She reminds us that hearing the allusions of Wisdom in the gospel “recalls and highlights many traditional ways of imagining the divine as a woman and emphasizes the close kinship between Jesus/Logos/Wisdom and the creation/cosmos/world.” (p. 24)

- n Read the Wisdom texts Kittredge lists, comparing and contrasting the figures of Wisdom and Jesus.
- n What details grab your attention as you explore the Logos?

What does Kittredge name as the tragedy which produces so much of the energy of the gospel?

- n Review her offered interpretations. (See p. 26.)
- n What function is served by “the kinship of Logos with the creation of all things”?
- n Explore that rejection and kinship using the resources which Kittredge offers for continuing the conversation on page 31.

Kittredge names Jesus’ lack of success in the section Raymond Brown calls “the Book of Signs.” (p. 28)

- n How does she explain this?
- n What does Kittredge say is illustrated in the second section, Brown’s “Book of Glory”?
- n What is the empowerment offered? (p. 28)

In exploring the fourth and final stanza of the prologue, Kittredge points out that the word “flesh” (*sarx*), used to express the doctrine of the incarnation, has graphic and realistic connotations (pp. 28–29).

- n What are the implications of this word choice?

Continuing in this vein, explore the profound implications of “to tent,” *skenao*.

- n Where else in the Scripture are these Greek words used?
- n How do you experience “realized eschatology,” the theological idea of the ongoing presence of God with us?
- n What are the implications of God’s choosing to dwell with us? How does this affect your actions in the world?

Chapter Three: Signs in the Gospel and Gospel as Sign

Kittredge writes, “All the gospels are persuasive religious literature which seeks to communicate the character and import of Jesus, the gospel’s subject and hero.” (p. 33) She explains the way John highlights this communicative function by calling Jesus’ mighty deeds “signs.”

- n Revisit her explanation of the word “sign,” *semeion*.
- n What do signs communicate?
- n How do they differ from sacraments in John?

In what ways do John’s signs’ “far-ranging and rich connotations” help us to appreciate “the neglected dimensions of the sacrament of the eucharist”?

- n Where/how do wilderness feeding and farewell footwashing direct our focus?
- n What is unique in this focus?

Revisit Kittredge’s list of signs in John’s story of Jesus’ public ministry (p. 34) and the discussion of the complexity of these revelations of the divine. Kittredge writes, “the signs are not communicating something exciting about the near future, but something real and true about the present.” (p. 35)

- n What do the multi-layered and symbolic qualities of those evolved stories reveal to us about God?

Kittredge asserts, “Truths about God are not straightforwardly accessible, but must be communicated by indirect means, a medium that can be misunderstood as easily as comprehended.” (p. 36) She points out that these signs are enigmatic, concealing and revealing, dividing as well as uniting: “Characters respond to signs in positive, negative, and ambivalent ways.”

- n How is this explained in the gospel of John?
- n How do you experience this reality in your own life and that of your community?
- n Where is belief evoked in conversation? Where undermined? What determines the difference?

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Kittredge stresses two points about signs in John in response to common misunderstandings. (See pp. 36–37.)

- n What are the two points?
- n What is the attitude of the gospel toward “signs faith” (faith based on signs)?
- n In what ways is the glory of God repeatedly revealed in John?
- n What does Kittredge state one must grasp as the key to doing justice to the expansive foundation of this gospel? (p. 37)?

Kittredge comments on the particular details and odd sequence of the story of Jesus’ first sign at the wedding at Cana.

- n How do these details communicate more symbolically than realistically?
- n How would you respond to her “more promising questions” on page 39?
- n Are you comfortable trusting the Logos within you to be acting as you wonder about these responses? Why or why not?

Revisit Kittredge’s comments regarding the symbolism of the marriage feast.

- n Explore this image further, both in scholarly resources and in the experience of your study group.
- n Look up “consummation” in a dictionary. How does this resonate?
- n Why are consummation and the participation of Jesus and his friends important themes in the story of this first sign?
- n What good news is being proclaimed?

Kittredge writes of the feeding and walking on water following the sermon, “Jesus demands more and more specific beliefs and practices, and appears to lose people in the process.” (p. 43)

- n What reasons does she give for this shift?
- n What is the effect on you of this story of divine plenty and generosity?
- n In what ways do you find “its non-conformity . . . initially disorienting, but ultimately enriching”? (p. 45)

Reread John 6:16–21 in which Jesus comforts the disciples with the first of the great “I am” statements of the gospel.

- n How do you respond to Kittredge’s invitation to imagine what the predicate might be in an alternative midrash on the sea walking? (See p. 45.)
- n What observations does she make about the emphases of other “I am” speeches in John?

As you review this chapter of Kittredge’s study, what broad themes reveal themselves?

- n Have the signs John tells supported your belief in the life of Jesus?
- n So what? How will you behave differently for having thought about this?

Chapter Four: Your Father the Devil: Jews and Jewish Tradition in John

In this chapter, Kittredge explores the dynamics of hate and love in John.

- n How do you respond to her citing another scholar to the effect of “while for some people the gospel of John is the gospel of love, for some readers, it might be called the gospel of hate.” (p. 49)?
- n Can you “imagine hearing the text as others do, with the ears of Jewish readers or those outside the circle of belief”? How is that for you?
- n What do you do with the gospel’s portrayal of “sharp and irreconcilable opposition between those who believe and those who do not, between Jesus and ‘the world.’” (p. 51)? How does the language of opposition affect you?

As baptized Christians, we promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Kittredge calls us to task: “The sins committed in the name of these texts by our Christian ancestors make it necessary for us to struggle with the ethical problems poses by such harsh and uncompromising language.” (p. 52)

- n What will you do in response to this invitation “to try to understand the language of hate and to be in active and vigorous conversation with it”?

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Articulate “the historical situation of the Johannine community in relationship with its Jewish neighbors at the time of the writing of the gospel.” (p. 52)

- n Using outside resources, expand your knowledge of that historical situation.
- n What traumatic rift has been theorized?
- n What feelings are reflected in the language of enmity in the gospel?
- n Explore some of the extremes to which this dualism led.

Kittredge asserts, “the gospel of John’s anti-Judaism is the most disruptive element to an expansive reading.” (p. 54)

- n What is required, according to Kittredge, to help us find respectful ways to be in dialogue with faithful Jews?

Read John 11:1–46 about the death and raising of Lazarus.

- n In what ways do the actions of the neighbors of Martha and Mary during this time of grief belie the hateful dualism Kittredge discusses?
- n What is the effect on Martha and Mary?
- n What is the effect on the community?

Read John 4:5–42 about Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. Kittredge says that this passage provides “a paradigm or icon for the expansive arc of the gospel and to a great extent, counteracts the rigidity of its black and white outlook.” (pp. 57–58) She addresses it “not as a realistic report of an episode during Jesus’ lifetime, but a highly structured, developed version enriched by the experience of the Johannine community with Samaritan mission, women apostolic leaders, and discrimination.” (p. 58) Revisit Kittredge’s discussion of the story with its racy connotations of sex, marriage, religion, prostitution, and foreigners. In the midst of it all is a minority woman who pushes back on Jesus’ authority in ways both literal and beyond.

- n What role does this dialogue play in eliciting faith?
(See p. 60.)
- n What is the effect of Jesus’ self-revelation on the Samaritan woman?
- n What does Kittredge suggest she represents in this gospel?
- n In what ways have you been brought to Jesus’ presence by the testimony of others?

- n What direct experience of Jesus invites you towards deeper levels of belief?

Kittredge writes of the reality of the language of hate and love in the gospel of John. She allows that this Samaritan heroine does not necessarily contradict the anti-Jewish perspective of the gospel as a whole. However, Kittredge goes beyond that.

- n What guidance does Kittredge offer towards discovering the gospel's assertion of Christ's incarnation and his involvement with the creation of all things?
- n Are you convinced? What more would you like to know?

Chapter Five: The Beloved Community: Leadership among the Disciples Whom Jesus Loves

Kittredge invites us to “picture (the Last Supper as you know it) askew, with its most familiar element missing, the institution of the eucharist, and in its place, another rite, followed by hours of teaching which spin and weave and expand the significance of that rite and reflect back upon the meaning of Jesus' encounters during his encampment in the world.” (p. 65)

- n How does that work for you?
- n Where is it comfortable?
- n Where is this imagined image a challenge to you?

Read John 13–17 about the last supper and sermon.

- n Do some exegesis on foot washing in first century Mediterranean culture: When was it done? By whom? What did it represent?
- n What has been your own experience of foot washing?
- n What does Kittredge suggest is the purpose of the foot washing in John?

Revisit Kittredge's discussion of friendship as Jesus' ministry in John. (pp. 68–70)

- n What is the etymology of “friendship”? Check out an etymological dictionary and see what you find.
- n Compare these ideas with your own experiences and observations of friendship. Where do you experience groups that are “intimate, but not elite”?

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Kittredge comments, “It is intriguing to reflect on the meaning of this division (between the narration of deeds of public ministry in the Book of Signs and the more intimate teaching of the community of the beloved disciples) in the gospel.” (p. 69)

- n Explore this division further.
- n What do you note about the public versus the private ministry accounts?
- n Which of the explanations Kittredge offers fits well for you?

Research *meno*.

- n In what other contexts is this verb used? with what connotations?
- n Where else do you find similar activity in the Scripture? in your lived reality?

Kittredge writes, “When read in its place in the gospel of John, the story eloquently proclaims Mary’s authority and leadership in the memory of this community.” (p. 72)

- n Look again at the distinctions from other gospels that Kittredge highlights for us.
- n How is this unique role for Mary familiar?
- n How does it expand your thinking?

In her explanations of the role of “the beloved disciple,” Kittredge presents particular parallels and uniquenesses in the role. (See pp. 72–74.)

- n Upon what does Kittredge see leadership in John as primarily based?
- n What roles do seeing and witnessing have in this leadership?
- n Why is the anonymity of “the beloved disciple” important in John?

Kittredge notes pastoral and reassuring dimensions as well as legal connotations of the Paraclete, the Advocate. (p. 75)

- n In what ways does the presence of the Paraclete alleviate the problem of leadership succession in John?
- n What will the vital and active presence of the Paraclete do in the community?
- n How is the ongoing quality of the Spirit’s presence expressed and expected in John? in your own community?

Kittredge writes of the specific and varied activities of “the beloved disciple” and yet this person remains nameless. (p. 76)

- n What are the implications of the namelessness of the disciple about whom the memory of the community centers?
- n What invitation is effected in this naming void?

Kittredge states, “the Johannine community who authored this gospel experienced the vigorous activity of the Paraclete in their midst.” (p. 77)

- n In what ways does your community experience and claim the vigorous activity of the Paraclete in your midst?
- n How is your vision of Jesus the medium through which people come to belief?

Chapter Six: Multiple Modes of Knowing: Easter in John

Reread John 19:31 to the end. Kittredge asserts that the gospel message can only be properly spoken through the complexity, the intricacy, and the playfulness John models. (p. 79) John is full of narratives whose meanings far outrun their surface level, while still depending upon material realities as they meander along invitingly. Again, “the paradox and mystery and elusiveness of the Word coming into the world can be expressed in no other way.” (p. 80)

- n How do you respond to this “patient and generous” presentation of gospel truth?
- n What metaphors come to mind for the necessity of this indirect approach to the paradox, mystery, and elusiveness of the Word coming into the world?
- n Why must it be so?
- n How do the repetition and variation which the gospel employs support the goal of calling forth belief?

Kittredge writes that John, like all the gospels, is written in the light of Easter. (p. 80)

- n What does she mean by this?
- n In what ways are you reading John now in the light of Easter? What is more clear? What shadows are cast?
- n In what ways do you still seek to know “the explosive experience of resurrection”?

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Kittredge notes that “only in John is Jesus buried in a garden.” (p. 82)

- n Explore the imagery of gardens in Scripture.
- n Why is it important that John sets Jesus’ burial in a garden?
- n What do gardens represent in your own life?

Review Kittredge’s discussion of Mary coming to the tomb. (p. 82)

- n How do you respond to Kittredge’s invitation “to let go of the image of Mary, the repentant and reformed sinner, coming in the dark to the tomb on the first day of the week”?
- n How does John use Mary’s incomplete understanding of the truth to invite your belief in Jesus?
- n What elements of their interaction allow Mary to know Jesus? What allows this shift from misunderstanding to communion?
- n Where are you given the opportunity to offer these elements in your own ministry?

Kittredge explores Jesus’ instructions not to hold on to him on page 84.

- n What interpretation of this instruction resonates best with the whole of John?
- n To where does Jesus redirect Mary’s attention, according to Kittredge?
- n Into what role does this place Mary?
- n What implications does Jesus’ instruction have for our attention today?
- n Where do you find effective leadership in the Church in our own times?

Kittredge comments that “unlike the Lukan story of the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, this is a quiet affair, emphasizing soft wind and not fire.” (Acts 2:1–13). (pp. 86–87)

- n What effect does this gentleness have on the reader?
- n How is it in keeping with John’s style throughout the gospel?

Check out Kittredge’s suggestions of better names for Thomas. (p. 87)

- n What else do you know of Thomas? (See John 11:16 and 14:5.)
- n What does Jesus offer Thomas in response to his demands?
- n What experience do you need to believe?

John 20:31 states that “these (signs) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

- n What does life in Jesus’ name look like?
- n How do you recognize it?

In recounting the variety of traditions of Jesus’ appearances, John includes one more feast after the summary of the gospel’s purpose.

- n To what metaphors does Kittredge call the readers’ attention?
- n What emphasis is reflected for the ongoing life of the Johannine community?
- n How does this account “bring the gospel more into the stream of what was becoming the dominant tradition of the developing church in which Peter held the role of leader”? (p. 90)

Kittredge reminds her readers that “for the gospel of John, the Easter season, the time when Jesus shows signs, appears, speaks, is not over, but may indeed still be going on through the work of the Paraclete and through the vision of its faithful leaders.” (p. 91)

- n So what?!
- n In what ways do you participate in the ongoing Easter season?

Noticing “the diversity and multitudes of ways to communicate the holy,” Kittredge invites us to en flesh this conversation.

- n Go there. Follow her suggestions on page 91 for imagining the concrete circumstances and telling details which speak of your past, present, and future. Adapt her instructions to fit your particular situation. What do you find?
- n What difference does it make that you have studied this expansive and promising gospel? How have your prayers at the opening of this study been answered? Whom will you tell?

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