

From Darkness to Light in the Gospel of John

2015 Florida College Lectures, Puckett Auditorium

Introduction

- 1) Gratitude
- 2) There are four parts of this discussion
 - A) I don't have enough time to get into a lot of detail about each part; but my lecture notes, PowerPoint, and full research is posted on my blog for you to look at later at your convenience
 - B) <https://ryboyer.wordpress.com/>
- 3) IMPORTANT NOTE: I cite many authors in my research and in this lecture. My citing their work is not a personal endorsement of the full scope of their writing, their worldview, or their approach to the Scriptures.

Social Science and Biblical Studies

- 1) Illustration: How archaeology helps to understand the Bible
 - A) "No single discipline has contributed as much as archaeology to the interpretation and delight of reading the Bible."¹
 - B) "We should be reminded, too, that the only new facts about the Bible and the world in which the events occurred, the personalities lived, and it was written come from archaeological research."²
 - C) POINT – The Bible is still our supreme authority, and archaeology does not define or change Bible; but it does help us to understand what we are reading.
- 2) I might argue, however, that archaeology is not the only discipline from which we can glean helpful information about how to understand the Bible
 - A) "It is now possible to speak of something fundamentally new in biblical studies, not in the sense that older and more traditional approaches have been rendered obsolete, but that a new set of assumptions has made it possible to understand early Christianity in significantly new ways."³
 - B) All we are doing here is adding to our toolbox
 - 1) We already have a toolbox full of instruments that help us understand the Bible
 - (a) Archaeology
 - (b) Historical details: authorship, date, provenance, purpose,
 - (c) Historical contexts – ex. If we are going to read 1 Corinthians, then it's helpful to know something about Corinth
 - (d) Geography
 - 2) "Such information is certainly of great value for making the New Testament intelligible. However, most of the time Bible students take all such information and conceive it as operating in much the same way as it would operate in our own society. Such unconscious shuffling of cultural contexts might make the Bible immediately relevant to the student, but at what costs to the meaning intended by the original authors, the meaning most Christians would hold to be intended by God?"⁴

¹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "How Has Archaeology Corroborated the Bible?," in *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith*, ed. Ted Cabal et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), 1148.

² Keith Schoville, "Top Ten Major Archaeological Discoveries of the Twentieth Century Relating to the Biblical World" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 4 (Spring 2001): 13.

³ John G. Gager, "Shall We Marry Our Enemies? Sociology and the New Testament." *Interpretation*. 36.3 (1982), 256.

⁴ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights From Cultural Anthropology*. Third Edition, Revised and Expanded. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), xi.

- 3) All we are doing here is adding trying to be more thorough in our understanding about the world in which the Bible was written
- 3) Examples of how you might see this in a practical way
 - A) David DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004.
 - 1) Chapter 3: The Cultural and Social World of the Early Church
 - (a) Purity and Pollution
 - (b) Honor and Shame
 - (c) Patronage and Reciprocity
 - (d) The Shape and Significance of “Family” in the Ancient World (kinship)
 - (e) “In order to hear the New Testament as its authors intended and as its first audiences did, we need to explore these texts not only in their historical or literary or social context, but also in their cultural contexts.”⁵
 - 2) _____. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000.
 - B) D.A. Carson’s, *An Introduction to the New Testament*
 - 1) 1st edition (1992): Carson, Moo, Morris, Zondervan
 - 2) 2nd edition (2005): Carson, Moo, Zondervan
 - (a) Preface - “We have included in each chapter a more substantial summary of the content of the biblical books and brief interaction, where relevant, with some of the more recent literary and social-science approaches to New Testament interpretation.”
- 4) Question: Is there anything in the social sciences that can help us understand the Bible better?
- 5) Suggestion
 - A) There is a sociological term called liminality
 - B) My suggestion is that when we understand and apply the concept of liminality to the Gospel of John two things are going to happen:
 - 1) We are going to see what I think is John’s intent in writing his Gospel in the first place
 - 2) A whole new world of application is going to be set right in front of my face as we ask the question, “What does God want from me?”

⁵ *Introduction*, 111.

Liminality

1) Introduction

- A) If this is something you want to look into a little more, there is more in my paper on my blog
- B) For the purposes of this conversation, I'm simply going to introduce the concept

2) Liminality is often described as "betwixt and between." It is the middle place between two social structures.

A) Classic illustration: Movement from childhood to adulthood

1) There are two recognizable social structures

(a) Childhood, and all that goes along with that

- (i) Who is a child?
- (ii) What does society expect from a child?
- (iii) There are certain norms and expectations that go along with childhood, right
- (iv) We don't expect a 6 year old to go out into the world, work a 40-hour week, collect a pay check and contribute to the financial well-being of the family
- (v) There are certain things we expect from our children: play, go to school, we want to keep them innocent from some of the harsh realities of the world
- (vi) Here, we have one recognizable social structure: Childhood

(b) Adulthood (childhood is different from adulthood)

- (i) If there is an adult who acts like a child, then we say there is something wrong with that person.
- (ii) Society has certain norms and expectations of adulthood that don't apply to childhood.
- (iii) Adulthood is a separate social structure

2) Liminality is the middle place – betwixt and between

(a) In this illustration, liminality is the in-between place where we are

- (i) Neither a child, nor an adult
- (ii) Both a child, and an adult

(b) We might have some trouble with this illustration because we are weird compared to most other societies throughout the history of the world

(i) In most other times and places there is some kind of defining mark and ritual where a person moves from childhood to adulthood

- (a) Maybe it's a certain age, or puberty
- (b) *Raising a Modern-Day Knight: A Father's Role in Guiding His Son to Authentic Manhood*, Robert Lewis

(ii) In our society, the liminal place is called being a Teenager

- (a) A teenager is not really a child, but they are also not an adult
- (b) And we have a problem that others have not had in the past – When and how does one become an adult?
 - i. Milestones:
 - ii. 16 – driver's license
 - iii. 18 – you can vote
 - iv. 21 – you can pretty much make any decision that you want for yourself

- v. Healthcare.gov makes this predicament even more difficult – “If a plan covers children, they can be added to or kept on a parent’s health insurance policy until they turn 26 years old. Children can join or remain on a parent’s plan even if they are...
 - a. Married
 - b. Not living with their parents
 - c. Attending school
 - d. Not financially dependent on their parents
 - e. Eligible to enroll in their employer’s plan”⁶

(iii) So, we have this liminal place between childhood and adulthood that just drags on where a person is...

- (a) Neither a child, nor an adult
- (b) Both a child, and an adult
- (c) What do we do with this kind of person? What do we expect of them?

B) Liminality (to be on the limit) is when a person is in between two definable and recognizable social structures (like childhood and adulthood)

3) Rites of passage / Rituals

A) These are the things that MOVE a person from one social structure to another

4) Transition

A) My suggestion is that the Gospel of John is written to a liminal audience – people in the middle

B) If liminality is “betwixt and between” two social structures, then in our next step we need to define the two social structures that the liminal audience of John is between

⁶ <https://www.healthcare.gov/young-adults/children-under-26/>

Identifying Social Structures

1) John, more than any other author in the NT, sees a clear and definitive line between two social groups: In John's writing you're either in or you're out. There is no middle ground in John

A) This aspect of John's thinking is called Dualism

NEGATIVE POLE	EXAMPLE	POSITIVE POLE
darkness	1:5	light
below	8:23	above
flesh	3:6	spirit
death	3:36	life (eternal)
falsehood (lie)	8:44-47	truth
earth	3:31	heaven
Satan	13:27	God
"The Jews" (sometimes) "the world" (sometimes)	1:19 and 47; 17:14	Israel ⁷

B) This is the reason for the title of this presentation: *From Darkness to Light in the Gospel of John*

1) Kysar says, "The distinction is not basically a moral one between those who live 'good lives' and those who live 'bad lives.' The distinction is between two ways of understanding oneself in relationship to the whole of reality—between two ways in which a person might answer the question, Who am I?"⁸

2) I think we can define the two social groups

A) The negative pole (darkness, below, flesh, death, falsehood/lies, earth, Satan)

1) *Ioudaios* (71 times)

(a) There's an ongoing debate about how to treat this word

(b) Most of our Bibles treat it "Jews" most of the time

(i) A legitimate problem is that when we think about the word "Jews" we think "religion"

(ii) World religions: Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism

(iii) I think Philip Esler is right here: in the modern reader's mind, "...religion is a stand-alone phenomenon that is separable from other arenas of human activity, such as politics and the economy."⁹

(iv) "The Jews" = circumcision, Sabbath observance, laws of ritual purity (clean/unclean) – religious things

(c) A proposed solution: "The Judeans"

(i) This is a category much bigger than religion

⁷ Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, 74.

⁸ Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, 75.

⁹ Philip F. Esler, "From IOUDAIOS to Children of God: The Development of a Non-Ethnic Group Identity in the Gospel of John," In *In Other Words: Essays on Social Science Methods & the New Testament in Honor of Jerome H. Neyrey*. Edited by Anselm C. Hagedorn, Zeba A. Crook and Eric Stewart. The Social World of Biblical Antiquity, Second Series, vol. 1 Edited by Keith W. Whitelam and James G. Crossley (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 111.

- (ii) Problem: My guess is that most modern readers will not think about everything that it means to belong to this group of people, but more likely, now we are thinking about geography
- (iii) So, now it's going to be hard to talk about "a Judean" who lives in Rome or Asia Minor
- (d) Whatever we call this group, we need to make sure we are talking about a comprehensive ethnicity, and not just a part of that ethnicity such as religion or geography (Philip Esler):
 - (i) A common proper name to identify the group.
 - (ii) A myth of common ancestry ('myth' is significant, in that it indicates that the genealogical accuracy of the claimed descent is immaterial).
 - (iii) A shared history or shared memories of a common past that embraces heroes, events and their commemoration.
 - (iv) A common culture, covering customs, language, religion and so on.
 - (v) A link with homeland, either through actual occupation or by symbolic attachment to the ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples.
 - (vi) A sense of communal solidarity.¹⁰

2) *The World* (78 times)

- (a) When we view *Ioudaios* from a perspective of comprehensive ethnicity, then it is not a far leap to understand *the world* as a synonym
- (b) Robert Kysar - "When the Gospel uses *kosmos* in a negative, dualistic sense, it does not refer to the physical world in which we live... The world, in these cases, seems to be a symbol representing the realm of unbelief, the area in which there is total rejection of the truth of God revealed in Christ... It symbolizes that way of being—that way of living—which is opposed to God and the divine plan of salvation for humans. It is a stance in life that finds relationship with God unnecessary and undesirable."¹¹

3) If I'm going to define the first social structure in John, I might call it *The Judean World*

B) The positive pole – Believers

- 1) Wayne Meeks, "The Man From Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism" *JBL* 91:1 (Mar. 1972): 44-72.
- 2) "Now their becoming detached from the world is, in the Gospel, identical with their being detached from Judaism. Those figures who want to 'believe' in Jesus but to remain within the Jewish community and the Jewish piety are damned with the most devastatingly dualistic epithets... coming to faith in Jesus for the Johannine group is a change in social location. Mere belief without joining the Johannine community, without making the decisive break with "the world," particularly the world of Judaism, is a diabolic 'lie'."¹²

3) The second social structure is called "Believers" (You can call them Christians if you want)

C) Two social structures

- 1) The Judean World
- 2) Believers

¹⁰ Esler, "From IOUDAIOI To Children of God," 114.

¹¹ Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, 74-75.

¹² Meeks, 69.

John's Purpose: From Darkness to Light

- 1) What is John doing in his Gospel? (2-part suggestion)
 - A) He wants social movement from the group called the Judean World to the group called Believers
 - B) Specifically, John is written to an audience who is liminal
 - 1) They are stuck in the middle of this transition
 - 2) Liminal language:
 - (a) They are both a part of the Judean World and the Believers
 - (b) They are neither a part of the Judean World nor the Believers

- 2) Let's put it all together in the Gospel of John

NOTE: I'm going to go out of order in order to make my point, and then you can sit down sometime and read the Gospel of John and see if you see this theme.

 - A) Believing is being where you're supposed to be
 - 1) Thomas account
 - 2) Jn. 20:19-20
 - 3) Jn. 20:24 – Thomas wasn't where he was supposed to be (implication: because of "the Jews")
 - 4) Jn. 20:25 – Not being where you are supposed to be is synonymous with not believing
 - 5) Jn. 20:26-28 – When Thomas is where he is supposed to be he becomes a believer

 - 6) THE POINT OF JOHN: Jn. 20:29-31

 - B) The first of the seven signs (Jn. 2:11-12 - so that you may beLEAVE)
 - 1) 2 things to point out about this miracle
 - 2) The first miracle is set within the context of a social transformation
 - (a) "...the larger story of John 2:1-11 is set within the context of the ritual of marriage... Marriage is a ritual of status transformation which allows two people to move from being single (and all of the accompanying societal status which this position entails) to being married. In almost every culture, marriage is one of the most important rituals because it (generally) incorporates kinship concerns, maturation, and (future) child-bearing."¹³
 - 3) Jn. 2:11-12 – Jesus' disciples "believe" in him
 - (a) This is not a statement about their "thinking" about Jesus
 - (b) It is a picture of what Believers DO. They go to where Jesus is.

 - C) Nicodemus
 - 1) Jn. 3
 - (a) Jn. 3:1 – Nicodemus is a solid picture of what it means to belong to "the Judean World"
 - (b) Jn. 3:2 – "night"
 - (i) Nicodemus is a liminal Christian
 - (ii) He wants to believe in Jesus and follow Jesus
 - (iii) But he doesn't want his friends to know. He doesn't want to lose his honor within the Judean World
 - (c) Jn. 3:3 – Jesus: You need to leave the "Judean World" into which you were born and be "born again" into another life
 - (d) This is ALL about social relocation
 - (e) Jn. 3:12-13 – physical relocation
 - (f) Jn. 3:14-21

¹³ Bolen, 148.

- 2) Contrast Nicodemus with the Samaritan Woman (Jn. 4)
 - (a) Nicodemus is solidly in the Judean World (He is a named man who is a ruler of the Jews)
 - (b) Jn. 4:1-4 – Jesus has a conversation with an unnamed woman who is a Samaritan
 - (c) The result:
 - (i) Jn. 4:28-30
 - (ii) Jn. 4:39-41 – They go to where Jesus is (i.e. they become Believers)

- 3) Jn. 7:45-52
 - (a) We want Nicodemus to be successful here, but his silence is reminiscent of why Thomas was not where he was supposed to be - Because of fear of the Judean World
 - (b) Jump past the account of the woman caught in adultery (Jn. 7:53-8:11)
 - (c) Jn. 8:12 – This is the very next thing that Jesus says

- 4) Jn. 19:38-39
 - (a) It was nice of Joseph and Nicodemus to care for Jesus' body
 - (b) But their behavior is governed by their fear of the Judean World
 - (c) They're trying to stay right in the middle (be liminal); but what Jesus is calling for in John's Gospel is to leave that way of being that you were born into (the Judean World), and come to the place where I am – be a Believer

- 3) Summary: The Gospel of John is all about social relocation from Darkness to Light
 - A) Leave where you were
 - B) Go to where you're supposed to be
 - C) And, by the way: There is no such thing as a liminal (middle-of-the-road) Believer. Either do it, or don't.
 - D) Read the Gospel of John through this lens and let me know what you think

4) Application

- A) God's word is full of this same admonition
 - 1) I wish that you were hot or cold, but because you are luke-warm I will spit you out of my mouth
- B) John's Gospel takes this theme to the next level
 - 1) John is not just talking about being wholly committed in your heart, or your devotion to Jesus
 - 2) John is describing the process of entirely leaving your old manner of life – to the point of excommunication and persecution from your own kinship group – and to become a part of a new social group that is founded on the reality that Jesus is the Way.
- C) May God help us all...
 - 1) Not only to have the courage ourselves to do what God demands
 - 2) But also, to articulate to those who hear us the full extent of what it means to be a Believer