

Like an enthusiastic tour guide, Gerald Borchert, a recognized Johannine scholar, leads the reader on a path of history, culture, and literary strategy that illuminates the masterful gospel story with an easily accessible introduction to the narrative. While maintaining an engaging conversational style, he purposely moves us down main highways and back alleys that reveal previously overlooked treasures of insight and inspiration as he draws us deeper and deeper into the gospel's narrative world. *Reading John* is a delightfully unique tour not to be missed! —Craig McMahan, University Minister and Dean of the Chapel; Director of Mercer on Mission; Assistant Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences, Mercer University

Gerald Borchert's *Reading John* represents a lifetime of faithful scholarship devoted to truth. His observations come from a deep, pastorally sensitive, and lifelong engagement with the text of John in conversation with key scholars. The many ways Borchert elucidates the evangelist's storytelling prowess are impressive and edifying. I know of no other work that so concisely and eloquently explains John's genius and relevance for us today. —Eric Bolger, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College, College of the Ozarks

Gerald Borchert is a skillful guide as he leads readers into the remarkable story world of John's gospel. This work is grounded in solid scholarship and written in an engaging conversational style. The narrative asides, the author's personal experiences, and the interpretative insights provide a fresh rehearing of Jesus' story. —David May, Landreneau Guillory Chair of Biblical Studies, Central Baptist Theological Seminary

Gerald Borchert is a highly regarded expert on the Gospel of John. Yet, in *Reading John*, he now emerges also as a type of artist who champions the storytelling brilliance of the gospel writer. In fact, this book is written as if Borchert is the "storyteller of the storyteller." It is as if he is speaking his message, surrounded by eager listeners. His remarkable insights and conversational approach make this a book like no other. —Constance M. Cherry, Professor Emeritus of Christian Worship and Pastoral Ministry, Indiana Wesleyan University

Gerald Borchert's *Reading John* gives readers a new avenue for understanding the gospel. His informal style captures both the amazing simplicity and surprising intricacy of this gospel. He leaves the heavier interpretational matters to the footnotes and focuses instead on drawing the reader into the narrative world of the gospel in the same way that skilled storytellers in every age have engaged their audiences. —R. Garland Young, Vice President for Academic Affairs; Professor of the Practice of Religion and Greek, Milligan University

Want to read the Gospel of John with fresh eyes? Gerald Borchert writes with enthusiasm and respect for the text, combined with scholarly insights that move beyond superficial observations. He demonstrates how the popular interpretive paradigm of storytelling assists you in understanding John like never before! —Harry H. Hiller, Director, Cities and Olympics Project; Faculty Professor of Urban Sociology, University of Calgary

Gerald Borchert's *Reading John* continues to reflect the passion, contemporary significance, and scholarly depth that have characterized his work. While the Gospel of John has been seen primarily as a complex theological treatise on the life and teaching of Jesus, Borchert's understanding of this gospel as consisting of a series of interconnected story cycles, artfully constructed by the author, helps the reader hear this gospel through the apostolic storyteller in new, transforming ways. —Manfred T. Brauch, Former President, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Theology, Palmer Theological Seminary of Eastern University

Gerald Borchert has hit another home run in this fresh approach to reading, reflecting, and meditating on the Gospel of John. The delight that Borchert takes in God's self-revelation in Jesus the Christ, as told by the Johannine storyteller, is truly contagious. We should read this artful work devotionally and fall in love again with God through the Holy Spirit leading the reader to the incarnate Son, whose life, death, and resurrection renew the entirety of creation. —James R. Hart, President, The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became an incarnated Story. Gerald Borchert leads us in reading John's Good News story of Jesus through the captivating lens of ancient oral storytelling. His firm academic footing and faithfulness to the text offer us a clear portrayal of authenticity for our own journey of incarnating the Word in the world of today. —Ralph Korner, Academic Dean and Professor of Biblical Studies, Taylor Seminary (Canada)

# Reading John

The Bible's Transforming Storybook

Gerald L. Borchert

© 2023

Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,  
[www.nurturingfaith.net](http://www.nurturingfaith.net).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63528-220-7

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All translations of the biblical texts in this work have been rendered from the Hebrew and Greek texts by the author, although he readily admits his thought processes have been influenced considerably by a combination of the King James and Revised Standard versions of the Bible. The nuances and his understandings, however, are his.

On the Cover: Throughout Christian history the eagle has been associated with the Gospel of John.

*This book is gratefully dedicated to students past and present from many countries who have learned with me, as together we have probed the incredible depths of John's gospel stories. Many of those former students are now administrators, professors, ministers, and active lay persons, while some have passed on to meet the Savior of the world.*



## Webber Institute Books

Webber Institute Books (WIB) serves as the publishing arm of the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies (IWS). The Institute was founded by the late Robert E. Webber for the purpose of forming servant leaders in worship renewal with the perspective that “the way to the future necessarily runs through the past.” IWS is the only school in North America dedicated solely to graduate education in biblical foundations, historical development, theological reflection, and cultural analysis of worship. Its vision emphasizes that its graduates will “participate intentionally in the story of the Triune God” in order to “bring renewal in the local and global church by shaping life and ministry according to that story.” In scope it is “gospel-centered in nature and ecumenical in outlook, embracing and serving the whole church in its many expressions and variations.” Those interested in obtaining further information concerning the Institute should consult [www.iws.edu](http://www.iws.edu).

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It is the prayerful concern of both IWS and WIB that the information contained in these works will stimulate further reflection and discussion. The results of such exchange of ideas hopefully will enhance worship renewal within the various segments of the Christian church. Moreover, in keeping with the hopes and dreams of founder Bob Webber, may all that is done through this publishing enterprise enable Christians to reject the narcissistic patterns prevalent in contemporary society and give the glory to God who sent Jesus, the Christ, to provide for human transformation and in concert provided humans with the divine triune presence through the Holy Spirit.

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## Preface

As a response to many of my students and to a host of friends, it has been a challenging joy for me to return to analyzing the amazing Gospel of John—this time with a focus on storytelling. This book has been simmering in my mind for many years as I have taught in various parts of the world and written articles and books on various subjects related to the Gospel of John. While I have given attention to many other topics, it is not that I ever left the study of John: this gospel has been foundational for much of my thinking throughout my life.

As I will make clear in the introduction to this work, I have highlighted the fascinating nature of storytelling in the gospel as a prime example and model of early Christian storytelling. While the Johannine stories have come down to us in an exquisitely written theological document, I am convinced that this gospel clearly reflects its roots in the oral culture of the early church. Having published both a longer and shorter commentary and many articles and papers on this gospel, you can understand how this present study grows out of years of reflection.

Accordingly, setting down these subsequent ideas in print has been a refreshing experience for me. Indeed, this work reflects some of the patterns of thinking and teaching by which I have sought to communicate the message of the Johannine gospel to students and lay people for decades. Now in writing this work I have sought to walk the fine line between being sufficiently technical for the scholars (especially in the footnotes) and sufficiently non-technical for interested laypersons and students so that both will find it enticing reading. I have sent this manuscript to various professors and ministers for their views and have asked them to tell me if I have hit the nail on the head in terms of communication, and they have enthusiastically affirmed this work.

I ask you, therefore, to join me in reflecting on how the Johannine storyteller has effectively captured the hearts of countless Christians throughout the centuries. For many followers of Jesus, the Gospel of John has become their favorite book in the Bible. One reason for their attachment to this gospel is that it contains some of the best known and most quoted verses in the Christian canon. But the attachment for Christ-followers to this book goes far beyond quoting favorite biblical proof-texts that may even be painted on posters and exhibited in public gatherings by some well-meaning people who consider that such exhibits are effective means of communicating the gospel.

I would affirm Christians' love of texts such as John 3:16, but I would hope that those devotees of John's gospel would realize that the importance of such a beloved text resides in the contextual framework of a few more verses than just that one in the Nicodemus story. I also hope and pray that the commitment to that story is joined by an even greater zeal, love, and care for others—which is the key to the great command of Jesus in John 13:34-35 and its expansion in 15:12-17.

This work of the Johannine author has certainly been an effective resource for communicating the transforming power of the Son of God who came for a brief period into the world. Indeed, the Johannine storyteller possessed the amazing ability to encapsulate his ideas into vivid stories that lodge in the reader's memory and become epitomized in catch words, phrases, or verses.

For example, the Nicodemus story can be summarized in the popular expression of "born again" (John 3:1-12), or the story of the Samaritan woman can be epitomized in the idea of "not thirst again" (4:13). The experience of Nathaniel meeting Jesus can be linked to the Christianized idea of Jacob's ladder (1:43-51; cf. Gen 28:12), but please remember that neither contemporary humans nor Jacob in those stories ascended and descended on the said heavenly ladder/staircase: that role was given to angels! And, for all who have attended Christian funerals, they are not likely to forget the comfort offered in these consoling words: "Don't let your hearts be troubled" (14:1). And what Christian can forget Jesus' threefold question to Peter, "Do you love me?" that took place around the "second" charcoal fire (21:15-17)?

I trust you will realize that I have always enjoyed teaching these Johannine stories, but it became clear to me—as early as my first year of graduate study—that this gospel is laced with a multitude of themes that are repeated with varying nuances in different stories. So, I quickly learned that one of the best ways to teach students the Gospel of John was to assign them projects that would require them to trace the use of one or more of the Johannine themes throughout this gospel.<sup>1</sup> The responses of my students to such an assignment were overwhelmingly positive because it forced them to see the unifying thought processes that undergird the gospel. But an even more rewarding task is to analyze each of the stories of John and seek to determine how those stories fit into the organization of the Johannine storybook. That concern is the basic reason for this new book.

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1 See Gerald L. Borchert, *Great Themes From John* (Sioux Falls, SD: North American Baptist Seminary 1966, earlier published by Baptist Life Association News).

Clearly, the Johannine author was an astute storyteller. His language may be quite simple (John's Greek is not complex, as second- and even first-year Greek students can testify), but the importance of his theological ideas can require a great deal more reflection than is normally given to his work.

For example, do not think that a cursory reading of the prologue (1:1-18) will be adequate for understanding those initial eighteen verses. Indeed, they are loaded with implications and theological meaning. The same is true for chapter 2, which contains two very simple yet complex stories with a slightly mystifying conclusion that has not always been adequately interpreted (2:23-25). Similarly, as a former lawyer, I have repeatedly pondered the development of the argument in chapter 5 and how the Johannine storyteller moves Jesus between various roles in his legal confrontation with the Jewish establishment. He knew how to lead his readers into further reflection. And I warn you: do not read chapters 12 and 21 too quickly because you might miss the twists of meaning in the interchanges of those chapters.

My goal here, however, is not to extend this preface or to belabor the significance of themes in John. But let me simply mention a few of those themes so that, as you read this gospel, you will recognize them in the stories. Pay attention to the importance of:

- “light and darkness”
- “truth and lying”
- “seeing and believing”
- “believing and knowing”
- “light and life.”

Also give attention to the use of these terms, phrases, and events and their meanings and significance:

- “signs”
- “truly, truly” as an oath
- “the hour”
- “love”
- “judgment”
- “law” (as rules, not as a reflection of God's will)
- “obedience”
- “witness”

- “the lamb of God”
- “king”
- the Jewish festivals (particularly Passover).

Note, also, the contrasts in such concepts as:

- two perspectives of temple
- two resurrections
- two births
- two waters
- two foods
- two meanings for “worship
- “I am” and “I am not” (and who says them).

And it is crucial to understand the centrality of the “Father” and the use of “Son of Man” and “Son of God” in this gospel. These and other themes are embedded in many of the Johannine stories. Be sure you do not miss them!

Now concerning the organization of John, I would remind readers of what most of those who have taken an introductory course of New Testament in college or seminary probably have learned. Briefly stated, while we are not completely certain of the history of our four gospels, it is likely that the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) have resulted from an early borrowing process. We find the basic content of Matthew and Luke to be parallel to Mark, with the addition of sayings or teachings from an unknown source we usually call “Q” (a symbolic designation for the German word “*Quelle*,” meaning “source”) and some additional material in all three gospels that is unique to each one of them.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, much of their content can be found in at least one other of those first three gospels. But such is not true for the Gospel of John. Its organization and content are quite different and therefore appear to be independent of the other three gospels. But something else is also significant, namely: that all the gospels are about Jesus and all report about John the Baptist, and that Jesus...:

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<sup>2</sup> See for example “The Synoptic Problem” in Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundation, Volume 1, The Four Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, etc.), 139–160.

- ...fulfilled the promises of God to the people of Israel.
- ...chose twelve or perhaps seven disciples to follow him.
- ...healed and fed people.
- ...walked on water (the Sea of Galilee/Tiberias).
- ...was betrayed by Judas.
- ...was rejected by Jewish leadership and the people, and the Jewish leadership arranged for him to be put to death (crucified) by the Roman governor, Pilate.
- ...was raised from the dead on the third day and appeared to his disciples, who were instructed to become the primary witnesses of his resurrection and to proclaim the marvelous message of salvation to the world. (Note, however, that the resurrection appearance stories are missing from Mark but are implied there—see Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34).

But I would pointedly remind you that the presence of these stories in the Gospels represent much of what scholars since C.H. Dodd have defined as the *kerygma*—the foundational elements—of the early church’s preaching.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when one studies the Fourth Gospel, it becomes clear—apart from these kerygmatic elements noted above—that the basic organization of this gospel follows a different pattern than the other gospels.

As a result, you should notice that the Johannine storybook has a different feeling than the other three gospels. That is part of what makes John a unique model of early Christian storytelling. Its stories do not simply give you the factual accounts: they also suggest some of the evangelist’s perspectives on those events. Thus, the reader is led by the storyteller to ponder and question what in fact are the implications of each of his selected stories. And one should then consider why several of the stories are different than in the other gospels. (Yes, many of the main stories are quite different! And, yes, those that are similar usually have a particular focus.) So, the storyteller wants the reader (or listener) to probe for the significance or purpose of even the similar stories.

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<sup>3</sup> See C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936). See also Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11* in *New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 25–30 and “The Church’s Proclamation” in *Tension: Empowering Christian Thought and Life* (Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith, 2021), 168–171; John B. Polhill, “Kerygma and Didache” in *Dictionary of the New Testament and Its Developments*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and P.H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 626–29.

But as you probably know, the purpose statement (20:30-31) makes it clear that the stories in John are a “selection” and chosen for the purpose of challenging the reader (or storytelling listener) to believe in this Jesus, who is the Son of God, and that authentic believing should issue in a new way of life.

Before you encounter the stories themselves, please turn to my introduction and allow me to review some aspects concerning the nature of storytelling in general and perhaps some of my personal stories in particular. These might provide insight into my perspective on storytelling before I summarize for you the thorny issues of background, authorship, dating, and provenance for the Johannine gospel that I have detailed at length elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

Then, as you begin the storybook itself, be ready for some fascinating twists and surprises that you may not have encountered in your previous studies or readings concerning this gospel.

Finally, friends, since the Church has historically symbolized the Gospel of John with an eagle, I trust that your thoughts will soar with the eagle as you read and reflect on these uniquely designed stories from the elder statesman of early Christians. May you be drawn to his lofty perspectives of what it means to know, confess, and live with the evangelist's captivating testimony that Jesus, the Christ, is indeed the dying-risen Son of God who takes away the sin of the world and offers to believers the gift of eternal life.

Welcome to this fascinating storybook. It is an inspiring book!

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In concluding these preliminary remarks, you are no doubt aware that a preface is not merely intended as an appropriate place to indicate a writer's purpose or intention for a book. It is a convenient place to express the writer's gratitude to those who have been of assistance in bringing this work to fruition.

First, I want to express my continuing gratitude to God for the sustaining presence of Jesus through the Spirit in my life and for the encouraging companionship of my dear wife, Doris, in my writing. Both have been for me unmerited blessings for which I am truly thankful.

Then, I would mention that this work is gratefully dedicated to my former students and especially in this case to those at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies. Students at the Webber Institute continually stimulated both Doris and me to become as creative as possible in directing them in their

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<sup>4</sup> See my extended discussion on these introductory matters in Borchert, *John 1–11*, 23–94.



learning processes so that all of us have been stimulated to use our God-given gifts to become the best ministers, worship leaders, and teachers under the divine tutelage of the Triune God. Thank you, dear students.

My sincere gratitude likewise extends to the Editorial Committee of the Webber Institute Books for their “enthusiastic” endorsement of this work. In addition, to those faculty members, alumni, and others who serve on this editorial board, including the general editor, Robert Myers, an esteemed former student, I remain deeply humbled that you again consider my work worthy of your high assessment. Thank you, committee members!

To those faculty members and administrators in various institutions both in the United States and Canada from various denominations who have read and commended my work at the front of this book, please accept my sincere gratitude for your very kind words. Your responses to my writing are most touching. Thank you, indeed!

Finally, I am grateful beyond words to both the editorial committee of Webber Institute Books for the unanimous approval of including my work in their Worship and Spirituality publications. I am once again very grateful to Bruce Gourley, the managing editor of Good Faith Media/Nurturing Faith, Inc. for negotiating the business aspects of publishing this manuscript. And I cannot thank Jackie Riley, my gracious editor, sufficiently for her great care and giftedness in bringing this third manuscript to press. She is a superb editor and is supported wonderfully by her associate, Cally Chisholm, in typesetting and artistry.

I offer a genuine “Thanks” to each of you for your kind spirit and dedicated work!