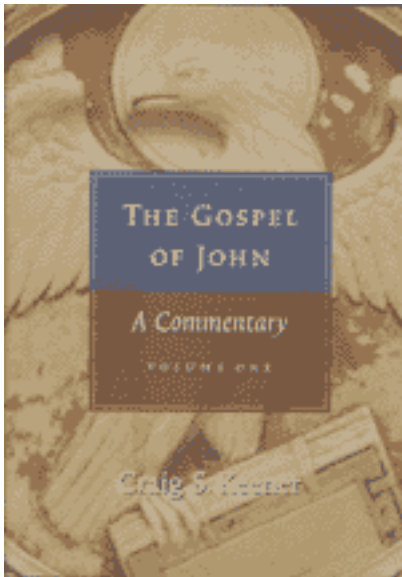


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Keener, Craig S.

The Gospel of John: A Commentary

2 vols.

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In New Testament studies, research in the Johannine literature has almost become a subdiscipline on its own. Although John is similar to the Synoptics in its co-Gospel character and general subject matter, the differences and its connections to the Johannine epistles have made Johannine research all the more complex. It is with this in mind that we evaluate Craig S. Keener's recent two-volume commentary on the Gospel of John. Certainly a commentary of such length (1,636 pages!) can still not deal comprehensively with all aspects of the Fourth Gospel. Thus, for the purpose of this review, we shall attempt to do two things. First, we shall discuss Keener's commentary on its own right and evaluate how well it succeeds in doing what it claims to do. Second, we will place Keener's John commentary in the context of other commentaries on John, thus giving it its rightful place in contemporary scholarship and providing the reader with a basic knowledge of where and when it is useful.

In the preface to the commentary, Keener explains that in this commentary he has focused on the area(s) where he believes he can make the greatest contribution to Johannine studies: the examination of the Fourth Gospel in light of its social-historical context (xxv). According to Keener, "Because the Fourth Gospel is a text, attention to literary and other issues are both essential and inescapable, but my own contributions of the longest range value to other researchers will be my supply of specific social data,

which in many cases has not yet to be brought to bear on the Gospel” (xxv). Although he admits that there is some value in looking at the prehistory of the Gospel text, Keener claims that his analysis will deal primarily with the finished Gospel as a whole. It is in this way, then, that Keener hopes to “focus this commentary on [its] ancient Mediterranean context, reconstructing insofar as possible John’s message to his ideal audience in the sort of environment he most likely could have presupposed” (xxvi).

Keener’s commentary is no different in form than most biblical commentaries. Beginning with an introduction of over three hundred pages, Keener discusses several issues related generally to a “Gospel” and more specifically to special Johannine themes. Especially helpful here is Keener’s keen ability to relate the introductory issues to the first-century world in which John was written. Keener does not bring anything new to the introductory discussion; he simply views the same questions and data with a more in-tuned social-historical grid. This is especially obvious when Keener looks at the possible backgrounds for the Fourth Gospel. For example, Keener spends ten pages of smaller print in an excursus on the value of rabbinic texts for Johannine study (185–94). This is where Keener is at his best, combining current Johannine study to the social-historical field of knowledge. Overall, Keener’s introduction to the commentary provides a helpful survey of all the major issues in the Gospel of John as well as helpful data and parallel information concerning the probable social-historical context in which the Gospel was written.

The rest of the commentary deals with the text of John in a linear fashion. Immediately in his section on the Prologue (1:1–18) one is reminded of the benefit of Keener’s social-historical approach. Keener summarizes well all the issues concerning the historical background of the Prologue. What is most impressive is the amount of Jewish sources used to discuss and highlight the imagery used in the opening verses of John. Keener also adds excellent insight into the nature of the written document, using as examples several Greco-Roman literary sources. Another section that was nicely highlighted by Keener’s social-historical approach was the Farewell Discourse. In a section of John full of Jewish imagery and ambiguous phrases, Keener helpfully places the literary context into the probable context of the first-century Mediterranean world. Especially thorough is his discussion on the background of the Paraclete (954–62). Overall, Keener’s commentary proper offers no surprises or anything especially significant. A good overview is given of all the primary exegetical issues, which are then approached with his social-historical method.

The extent of Keener’s secondary knowledge is exemplified in the nearly two-hundred-page bibliography. In an excellent format, Keener helpfully gives the full bibliographic information of the sources he used. Since Keener refers frequently to either important or

obscure historical sources, the bibliography is an excellent resource for the reader's further research.

Keener's commentary on the Gospel of John provides a helpful approach to reading John through a social-historical lens. This approach, which Keener establishes at the beginning of his commentary, is certainly the methodological guide in the rest of the commentary. In a Gospel that has images and phrases that are ambiguous in nature, especially to a modern reader, Keener's approach nicely grounds such language in its historical milieu. This social-historical approach is of far more value in the commentary proper than in the introduction, where the discussion is more broadly focused and more survey in nature. Although this commentary was published in 2003, it was primarily completed and submitted in 1997, having been delayed by unexpected problems in the editorial process (xxxix). This is unfortunate, since it only deals at a surface level with a new movement that challenges the historical use and function of the Gospels and their social setting, especially related to the audience of the Gospels (Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians*, 1998). Although this challenge to the current community interpretation of the Gospels is far from a consensus, it would have been advantageous to see how Keener's social-historical approach would have fared in light of this new paradigm. Overall, Keener accomplished what he set out to do: read John with an eye to special social and historical data related to this first-century, religious text.

It is now important to evaluate Keener's commentary in relation to other commentaries on the Gospel of John. Certainly all commentaries are not comprehensive on all the issues important to the Fourth Gospel, nor do they bare anything but the very strength and weakness of their author. *The Gospel of John* by Keener is no different. Its strength is certainly its social and historical approach to the exegetical issues of the Fourth Gospel. Keener's extensive knowledge of the primary and secondary literature helps provide a glimpse into the Gospel of John that literally no commentator has been able to provide as of yet. But this commentary's weakness is its overall literary and theological synthesis. Although Keener has excellent sections on what he calls "Revelatory Motifs" (233–79) and "Christology and Other Theology" (280–330), it is really nothing more than systematic discussions of the explicative meaning of historical issues. For more literary issues one would need to turn elsewhere (e.g., Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, 1993). Of course, one cannot expect Keener to do what no commentator has yet been able to do, write *the* commentary of John that is both exegetically detailed and fully comprehensive. Even the other primary John commentaries failed to do more than their various emphases would allow.

In conclusion, Craig S. Keener's *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* has provided an excellent resource for students of the Fourth Gospel. This commentary, though easily accessible in format, would be less applicable in its subject matter to a layperson or ministerial leader attempting to find resources for applying John to the present. Far from even attempting to do that, Keener has tried to take us from the present to the past, specifically the first-century social-historical context in which the Gospel was originally read. He has certainly taken us to the past and by doing so has met a need in Johannine research.