

# JOHN: LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS INTERPRETATION ESSAY GUIDELINES

Ian W. Scott

## OVERVIEW

Each student will write an essay **12-15 pages** in length offering an **interpretation of one passage** from the Gospel of John. This interpretation should **follow all the steps of the “transformational” interpretive method** with which we have worked in the course.

## SELECTING A PASSAGE

- You are free to select **any passage you like within the NT**. Be aware that some passages are more difficult than others or have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. This challenging passages can, though, be very rewarding to work with!
- In the **Gospels or Acts**, the passage should usually consist of **one complete pericope** (episode).
- In a **letter, homily**, or an extended **speech** in the Gospels or Acts, look for a **complete paragraph** (a section with a clear beginning and ending, which deals with one coherent topic or theme).
- **YOU MUST CONFIRM YOUR PASSAGE SELECTION WITH THE PROFESSOR BEFORE YOU BEGIN WORK ON THE ESSAY.**

## FORMAT

- typed, **double spaced**
- **12pt** Times New Roman font, with margins of **1”**
- All references (footnotes, parenthetical references, bibliography) should follow the **SBL Handbook of Style**. A link to the SBL Handbook online is provided on the class web-site.
- **PLEASE USE FOOTNOTES (BOTTOM OF PAGE) OR PARENTHETICAL REFERENCES** rather than end-notes.
- You must include a **bibliography** at the end listing all the works cited in your paper.
- You **may use headings** and sub-headings in your essay if that is helpful, but these are not required.
- Please **do not leave a blank line between paragraphs**, but simply indent the first line of each new paragraph. A blank line is only necessary before headings.

## RESEARCH

- Be sure to **use the “transformational” interpretive process that I have outlined in class.**
- Remember that **research and writing are two separate steps**. You can't write a good, focused essay until *after* you have finished your research.

- **Begin by working through the steps for interpretation on your own**, drawing on what you have learned in readings and classes. Make your own observations about the passage.
- **After** that initial pass through the interpretive process, look at several scholarly sources to see **who might agree** with you, what **alternate points of view** you might need to interact with, and what **new ideas or observations** require some **re-thinking** of your interpretation.
- Remember that you **cannot include all the fruits of your research in the essay**. You will dig up a lot of information and make a lot of observations that are fascinating (even devotionally meaningful to you), but that do not relate to the central transformation you need to describe.

## SAMPLE OUTLINE

In what follows I try to help you understand how to turn our method for interpretation into a well-structured essay. After your research is finished, you should largely be able to plug your results in under the appropriate headings and have the basis of a good essay. Just do not use this outline (particularly the detailed descriptions in the boxes) too woodenly—you still need to use some judgment to craft a logical and readable essay.

### I. Introduction

- For a short essay like this your introduction should be just one short paragraph long (no more than half a page). Begin by introducing your passage and why it is important.
- The introduction should end with your thesis statement.
- This thesis statement should be two sentences:
  - 1) sum up in one sentence the transformation you are saying the passage was meant to provoke in the first century;
  - 2) sum up in a second sentence the analogous transformation it could prompt in your own life.

### II. Body

#### a. Transforming the first-century audience

##### i. Who was the first-century audience?

- First describe the **general date, location, and social/historical situation** of the audience.
  - If there's some debate about the audience for your book, just acknowledge that debate (perhaps in a footnote) and choose a likely option as a working hypothesis.

##### ii. What was their starting state?

- If the NT book suggests a particular **crisis or event** that prompted its writing, describe that event.
- Personalize this situation by describing the (fictional but plausible) story of a **typical individual** in that audience

- Try to think too about what **daily life** would involve for members of this community and describe aspects of that daily life that will be relevant for describing her/his transformation.
- Feel free to use my description of a typical audience member if I've provided one for your book, but try to flesh out that description a bit.
- A good resource here is the *Dictionary of New Testament Background*.

iii. What strategies did the author use to move them?

- First offer a brief (usually one paragraph) **summary** of the contents of your passage
- Point out **specific features of the passage** that help us to understand its impact on the audience.
  - What is **emphasized**? What is the **focus**?
  - How does this passage fit into a **larger argument** being made in the surrounding passages?
  - How does this passage touch on **themes** that are prominent in the surrounding passages or in the whole book?
  - Does the passage allude to parts of **the OT story**? How does it relate that OT story to the audience's lives?
  - Does the passage allude to **historical events or cultural practices** that the audience would have known?
- This is also the place to talk about **relevant disagreements** between the interpreters you read in your research
  - Be sure to say **which interpretation you agree with** if it's important for your essay.
  - Also, be sure to **present evidence from the passage** to support your choice.

iv. What new state did the author try to move them toward?

- **What kind of changes** could the writer expect the passage to have on the audience?
  - How would the audience's **thinking** change?
  - How would the audience's **attitudes and feelings** change?
  - How would their **behaviour and habits** change?
- Again, **personalize** this change by describing how your **one member of the audience** would be transformed.
  - Make sure that you touch on **all three dimensions** of the change: thoughts, emotions, and behaviour.
  - Make sure that you **get specific** in describing these changes (especially changed behaviour)--**imagine an ordinary-life situation** and describe specifically how her/his actions would be different the next day after hearing the passage.
- Remember
  - We're assuming the author's **strategies are successful**-- Don't describe a bad reaction to the passage.
  - Focus on the audience's reaction to the **central features of**

**the passage**, i.e. the things that are emphasized in the passage itself.

- Don't try to describe the impact of the passage on *every* member of the audience. It's enough to focus on its impact for this one (albeit typical) member of that audience.

b. A Contemporary Transformation

- i. How is your own starting state analogous to that of the first century audience?

- Focus, again, on the typical individual you've imagined as a representative of the audience.
- Describe relevant **similarities and differences** between that individual and yourself.
  - Remember here that there are lots of comparisons you could make that don't help us to understand your application of the passage. Focus on what's significant.
- In light of these similarities and differences, **describe one specific situation** in your own life that is analogous to the specific situation you described for your typical audience member.
  - Point out **how this personal situation is similar** to the situation of that first-century audience member, as well as **how this personal situation is different**. The similarities should be clear and substantial.

- ii. What new state would be analogous to the new state of the first century audience?

- Given the analogy between these two situations, describe a **transformation in your own life that would be analogous** to the first-century transformation you described.
  - Again, **point out the similarities and differences** between this change in your own life and the change in your sample audience member's life.
  - **Resist, at this stage, reducing the passage to abstract principles**. First draw a concrete analogy between that ancient individual and your own life.
- Once you have described an analogous transformation in your own life, **then you can briefly outline any general principles** that we can draw from the passage's impact on these two specific individuals.

III. **Conclusion** (single paragraph beginning with re-worded thesis statement)

- For a short essay like this, the conclusion should be **one short paragraph**.
- The first sentence should be a **re-statement (in two sentences) of your thesis**. These should express the same ideas as you stated in the thesis statement at the end of your introduction, but should express those ideas in slightly different words.
- From there you can offer a couple of sentences about the

broader implications of your interpretation, other possible applications of the passage, questions that you couldn't answer in the essay, etc.

## RESEARCH SOURCES

To gain full marks for the research portion of your grade, you should use the following range of research sources:

- **3 academic commentaries** on John *in addition to Moloney*.
  - These must be commentaries where a whole volume is devoted to your book (or at most 2 or 3 biblical books).
  - See my web-site for a list of good academic commentary series.
- **one article** in an academic **bible dictionary** or encyclopedia
  - **Do not** use popular-level dictionaries like the *Baker Bible Dictionary*.
  - **Do not** use Wikipedia or other resources that are not evaluated for accuracy before publication.
  - **Do** use
    - the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*,
    - the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press),
    - the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (InterVarsity Press),
    - the *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (InterVarsity Press), or
    - the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (InterVarsity Press).
    - These are often the most difficult resources for people to access online. If you are nowhere near a theological library, consider purchasing one of the InterVarsity dictionaries listed above through an online bookseller—they are an excellent resource for all kinds of study in the future!
  - **Appropriate information** on your passage might come from dictionary or encyclopedia **entries on**
    - the book in which your passage is found,
    - a theological theme or motif found in your passage,
    - a person or group active in your passage,
    - some element of historical or cultural background to your passage,
    - an interpretive approach that yields fruitful insights about your passage, or
    - the city in which the audience of your passage lived.
- **two** relevant academic **journal articles**
  - this can be found using the **ATLA journal database** through the Tyndale library's web-site. For those of you studying long-distance it is often possible to read journal articles full-text through the ATLA database record. Note that it is often most effective to search ATLA by **scripture reference** rather than by title;

- some articles are available in full-text electronic form, but I would like you to use **at least one article from the paper journals** in the library;
- references to journal articles can also be found in the **footnotes and section bibliographies** of commentaries and dictionary articles.

## SELF-CRITIQUE

Here are some **questions to ask yourself** as you write your essay and as you revise the finished product (notice that these correspond to the columns in my grading rubric):

### Argument

- does my contemporary analogy follow the same trajectory as the Gospel writer's interpretation of the events in Jesus' ministry?
- do I support my interpretation well with relevant and accurate evidence from the biblical text?
- where appropriate, do I support my interpretation well with relevant and accurate historical or cultural information?
- do I mention and respond to opposing interpretations of the passage?
- where appropriate, do I offer good reasons for rejecting opposing views?

### Writing

- do I write with clear, grammatical English?
- is my spelling correct, even for unfamiliar words?
- do I lead the reader clearly through my argument, using summarizing statements to relate each main point to my thesis?
- does each paragraph and section have a clear point? Does the point change clearly as I move to the next section?
- do I use proper SBL referencing and bibliography format?

### Research

- do I use all of the appropriate range of secondary sources?
- do I show a strong understanding of those sources?
- do I incorporate information or observations from them appropriately into my paper?
- do I include page numbers for all of my references to secondary sources?
- do I provide references not just for direct quotations, but also for any ideas or information drawn from your sources?
- do I integrate class material accurately and appropriately into my examination of the passage?

### Insight and significance

- is my contemporary interpretation of the passage significant and relevant?
- do my argument and thesis show depth of insight into the passage and/or the methods of interpretation?
- does my argument show some degree of creative or independent thought?