



# From Reading to Seeing: The Path to John Illuminated

Fiona Pfennigwerth

In 1976, my husband Ross and I attended the annual conference of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students, held in Bathurst NSW, where we were introduced to the Bible study method *Manuscript Discovery (MD)*. It was life-changing: discovering for ourselves Bible books as literary wholes; seeing texts as crafted works; readers given liberty to first-hand conversation with authors; group debate clarifying and refining our personal discoveries. We considered the text alone (printed into an A4 manuscript double-spaced without editorial intrusions of chapter and verse references, paragraphs or subheadings), and what we could glean from it of its overall themes and purposes and structure, the voice of its writer, and the circumstances of its intended first readers. And leaving the commentaries of experts until we had a list of issues to discuss with them.

For more than the next decade we ran camps with the then Anglican Youth Department, discovering a variety of biblical texts – and have continued to lead groups doing so in various forms since.


I began cutting and pasting long manuscript scrolls after camps according to our findings, and wondering how to highlight their authors' craftsmanship visually.

In the same period Leland Ryken was penning *How to read the Bible as literature*, noting:

Our experience of biblical poetry would be revolutionised if commentaries made extensive use of pictures...<sup>1</sup>

And Robert Alter and Frank Kermode were writing:

Over the last couple of decades... there has been a revival of interest in the literary qualities of [the biblical] texts... the general reader can now be offered a new view of the Bible as a work of great literary force and authority, a work of which it is entirely credible that it should have shaped the minds and lives of intelligent men and women for two millennia and more...<sup>2</sup>



They were driven by ‘the desire to read it well’ and, in studying individual Bible books, with ‘an intense concern for their internal relationships’<sup>3</sup>.

I had abandoned law to pursue my first love of artmaking (at least part-time). My favourite occupation was researching subjects from the natural world and depicting them intelligibly in watercolour. I saw my role as counterpoint to the version of reality being presented in mainline media: my painting of beauty and pattern on one wall of someone’s living room; the television on another.

Reading *Ruth* one camp I saw the writer’s skill in mirroring the story of its characters in the landscape in which they moved. Following camp, I added illustrations to my cut-and-paste scroll that suggested this artistry and the pattern of the text. It was the beginnings of my new venture marrying my loves of Scripture, the natural world, and drawing it, each reflecting the others.

Over the years my concerns grew regarding my perception that both within and beyond the church, biblical literacy was diminishing. (Please excuse the following mixed metaphors that describes these).

I felt the Bible was being presented as a dry-stone wall of unrelated pieces, each with its own subhead; the whole massive and – without expert help – dauntingly inaccessible. Bible studies were on the one hand scientific dissections of a corpse rather than a living relationship between reader and text that engaged the heart; and/or on the other, treated as if written ‘just for me’ with disregard to the original context and intended readership.

I felt that confidence in the art of open-ended meditation and discussion was being shaken by the fear of unorthodoxy.


And that the Bible text was being treated as an excavation site to be mined for its gold and its rubble discarded. I saw it as a painting to be viewed as a whole as well as appreciating its details. I was comforted later to read Kysar:

We might think of *John* as one large and complex painting, filled with brilliant colours and images. If we try to interpret the lower right-handed corner of the picture without understanding what role it plays in the total theme of the painting, we do violence to both the part and the whole.<sup>4</sup>

And this year, to discover William Brown, albeit in relation to the Psalms:

Scripture is not so much a source of propositions, much less a series of creeds or doctrines as ‘a vast collection of interwoven images’ (quoting Schokel *Manual of Hebrew Poetics* 100)...

Religious reading has become a lost art, reduced to ‘extract[ing] what is useful or exciting or entertaining from what is read, preferably with dispatch, and then [moving] on to something else’ (quoting Paul Griffiths *Religious reading: the place*



*of reading in the practice of religion* 1999). To read religiously, however, is to read the text ‘as a lover reads, with a tensile attentiveness that wishes to linger, to prolong, to savour, and has no interest... in the quick orgasm of consumption’ (ibid). To read theologically is, in part, to linger over the metaphor.<sup>5</sup>

I was encouraged by the work of the *St John’s Bible* project, undertaken by St John’s Abbey and University, Collegeville MN, USA and the Queen’s calligrapher Donald Jackson, which sought to revive the Bible as a book to savour and sound.<sup>6</sup>

In my own small sphere of producing contemporary illuminated manuscripts, I seek to promote careful, respectful, and holistic study of the Scriptures to a contemporary audience dominated by the visual on screen and designer-printing.

*My work towards The Gospel according to John illuminated.*


I first studied *John* as a whole manuscript at another AFES conference, in Brisbane in the late 70s-early 80s. From that study I gained a sense of John’s style in the interplay of poetics and narrative, and the Jewish feasts as a structural device. Based on this early impression, I printed and divided a manuscript into sections where a Jewish feast was first introduced, which gave me workable units to study holistically before reassembling them into its whole.

From that exercise I produced a number of editions. The Festival structure proved valid and valuable. For example, it brought Nicodemus and the woman at the well into one unit as foils to each other; Jesus as crucified on the Day of Preparation for the Passover, at the same time lambs were being slaughtered for the feast. The Gospel begins with a week from John’s first testimony to Jesus’ first sign, and concludes with his resurrection ‘on the first day of the week’ – an envelope structure from Creation – Jewish festivals –to Recreation. I structured the Gospel in 10 parts: 1 Prologue (Creation and the eternal; 2 Preface (the testimony of John and introduction to Jesus); 3-8 six Jewish feasts; 9 New Creation; and 10 Epilogue. The text was a seamless weaving of threads: incidents related as courtroom drama episodes; themes of light and dark played out in references to day and night; life and death; understanding and misunderstanding (grasping and not grasping); metaphor and literal; receiving and rejecting.

The author plays with the symbolic number seven (complete): 7 *I am* that stand alone; 7 with predicates; 7 signs; 6 Jewish feasts and a dawn barbeque.

*And so I came to a working decision as to my setting out the text of John:*

I rendered all the text initially in brown, later changing sections into black and green.



Black text represents the courtroom motif that is woven through the text in blocks that I justified, and sentences. This is particularly important in the annexures A-C to this paper:

A: *John* 5:16–6:3 (p18-19), the second courtroom scene, in which ‘the Jews’ open their persecution/prosecution case (the Greek term embraces both meanings). Page 18 sets out poetically Jesus’ defence and the blessings that flow from that. Page 19 is set out as a legal argument outlining his witnesses in support.

B: *John* 8:13-59 (p28-29) is a further confrontation between Jesus and ‘the Jews’ styled as another trial episode. Page 28 revisits the issue of witnesses, and breaks the trial motif to show the consequences of not believing them. The increasingly acrid debate on p29 begins with Jesus’ words of liberation <sup>7</sup> highlighted to show his good intentions foiled, and blessing plummet to cursing.

C: *John* 18:28–19:22 (p56-57), in which the writer styles his report as the climax and resolution of his courtroom drama ‘*The Jews’ v Jesus*, with the Roman Governor Pilate designated as judge in the early morning light. By him Jesus is vindicated (‘I find no fault in him’ x3), yet sentenced to death and executed (in 3 languages as King of the Jews) on the Day of Preparation for the Passover.

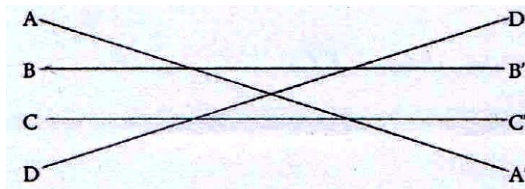
Metaphorical or metaphysical speech (mostly Jesus’) is rendered in poetic form that visually both links and contrasts it to the subsequent misunderstandings that allow John to explore the topic more fully. See for example Annexure D:

*John* 6:22–7:1 (p22-23): discussion arising from Jesus’ 4th sign of provision in the desert, with my emphases of the positive blessings on offer. The first *I am* with predicate – *the bread of life* – appears. The debate is positive on p22, but conflicted on p23: grumbling (as they did in the Exodus wilderness); desertion by many, but a remnant remained faithful.

Having used a larger font for Festival references as headings, I then enlarged other phrases as emphases and turning points, by which I sought to suggest the writer’s style. For example, Annexure E:

*John* 11:45–12:50, the bridge made of adjoining planks (set out in 8 columns) between the Lazarus story and the Last Supper Discourses (p38-41), including responses to the 6<sup>th</sup> sign, foreshadowing the coming climactic Passover, and giving pause in the narrative to let Jesus and the narrator reflect.

The Prologue of 1:1-18 (p2-3) is set out over a double-page spread in poetic form to show its carefully crafted overall pattern:



Where A = the eternal God, Father and Son/Word; B = the Son's light and glory, which *we* have grasped but *the darkness* has not; C = John the baptiser's witness; and D = the world which did not know or receive him contrasted with the ones who did.

Its wordplays are shown in the lining up of repeated words by indenting them to the same point:

<i>Word</i> with/was God	Children of God
<i>Light</i>	<i>Glory</i>
John's witness	John's witness
<i>Light</i>	<i>Grace</i>
People of the world	Jesus Christ at the Father's side

The background wash is a subtle suggestion of the dawn light of Creation and the eternal perspective, and the 'river' arcs to show the chiasm from the dry earth colour of unbelief to the blue waters of blessing. This Creation dawn theme is repeated at the end of the book by the author and echoed in my pictures.

Throughout the finished layout of the Gospel, double-page spreads contain discrete units of the text, and give text and readers breathing space through illustrations and the use of empty space to foster meditation and reflection.

Baulking at Jesus' formidable, uncompromising – and sometimes abrasive – interaction with 'the Jews' in the Gospel, I sought means to contextualise it. (Was I culturally cringing? I think so.) I put 'the Jews' into inverted commas, and wrote a careful description of the term that appears in the book's Explanations. And I read the Gospel again as a whole, looking specifically at the 'softer' side of Jesus. What I discovered was that *John* was not a theological treatise about Jesus as God's Son, but an invitation from God to *all* to receive the blessings that trusting him brings. Hardly rocket-science: John tells readers that that is his purpose in 20:31:

... these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The writer's purpose is executed by *parading* the blessings Jesus offers on the *basis* of who he is. Later, I read Gardner, who early on says:

John does not so much talk us into believing as set up spaces where the words and illustrations of Jesus address us, drawing us into the struggle to taste and see and understand...

And later in relation to the resurrection reports:

Even without seeing, John suggests in the way he structures scenes, readers to come will, in their own ways, sense the ground shifting, hear their names called, rejoice at life restored, and marvel at their deepest wounds transformed. He has arranged this text, in fact, to make such recognitions possible [quoting 20:31].<sup>8</sup>

I rendered all the text that relates to these offers of blessing into green, in the final manuscript as blue.

At last I had a theme for the illustrations: of the blessings Jesus offered in *his* terms of the metaphors of light, life and water – in his experience of semi-arid regions that form part of Israel – translated to our context of the impact of water after comprehensive rains in the semi-arid regions of far-west NSW.

At this point, with a draft textual layout and visual thematic habitat chosen, I consulted the *John* experts with respectful care, and made adjustments to my manuscript. And packed a car with drawing gear and cameras for a 3-week field trip to Broken Hill–Menindee–Mildura–Mungo.

*What was I seeking to achieve through the illustrations?*

*Primarily*, their role is to connect an ancient, written text to a contemporary, Australian visually-driven culture, with a national myth about our connection to our land.

*Firstly*, they are designed to reflect the themes raised in the adjacent text. They are *not* retelling the story: they are not a visual adaptation or interpretation, like the movie of a book, through which I direct or channel readers to see the action as I do. Rather, I am opening them up to possibilities of the text's depths. As I paraphrase Gregory the Great on the book's flyleaf:

John's Gospel is like a pool in which a lamb may wade and an elephant may swim<sup>9</sup>

*Secondly*, they suggest the way the Gospel is structured.

Thus, for example, the illustrations of lambs reflect both *The lamb of God* theme of chapters 1 and 19 (pp4-5 and 58-59) and the Gospel pattern that bookends it inside the *Creation–Recreation* theme. The illustration on p5 alludes to John's witness to Jesus as the lamb of God; on page 59 the lamb is upright and magisterial on a dam that hints at hidden water, as the Gospel hints in the piercing of Jesus' side. He had foreshadowed his crucifixion as his *lifting up* (or *glory*) in 3:15 and 12:32 that he undertakes willingly, with



the Father's authority to lay down his life and take it up again (10:18) – a triumph and not a defeat. It was with this in mind that I chose this composition.



This second image also includes a floral border that suggests the garden in which Jesus was crucified (19:41), connecting it to the theme *Creation-new Creation*.



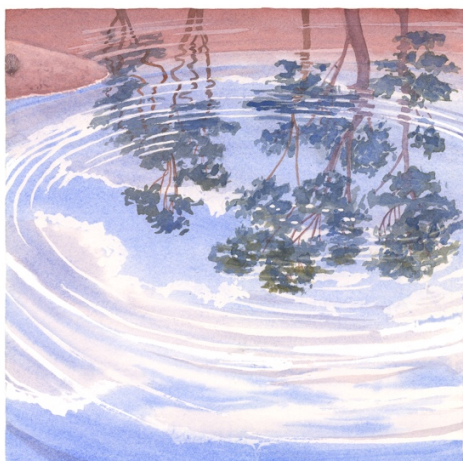
A river is suggested along the foot of the first 4 chapters – until opposition fragments it.

John's style – the timbre of his voice – is pared-back, understated, reflective, subtle; elegant but not flowery. So the illustrations needed to reflect that: to be contemplative rather than pretty or decorative. For example, the illustration for John 7:37 and 8:12 of light and water:





*Thirdly*, some illustrations are designed to sound the echo of pairs of characters and incidents. For example, in chapters 5 and 9 (pp16 and 30): two pools, 2 healings, two entirely different responses, each illustration the same size and dimension as its accompanied text:



*Fourthly*, some pages are designed simply to give space for reader reflection.

Some are visual metaphors of underlying themes, rather than the surface image that Jesus uses. Thus the illustration for *John 15* (p48-49) touches on the theme of birds *abiding* in abundance in the waters of blessing, rather than vine and branches.







Have I covered all the themes and purposes of *John*? By no means. Some were not visually transferable to my chosen habitat; others I am still discovering, and will continue to do so. My aim is merely to begin to open up the text – no-one can claim to have ‘done’ *John*.

### *Metaphor and Affect*

In *Seeing the Psalms* William Brown writes:

‘Metaphors not only communicate suggestive and expressive meanings, but they also become iconic objects through their fusion of sense with sound’ [quoting Earl R MacCormac]. In the metaphor, ‘seeing as’ and ‘saying’ converge in powerful ways to stimulate reflection and emotion... the metaphor signals the transference of meaning from something familiar to something new (Aristotle *Poetics*) ...The metaphor is not simply a literary ornament or a vehicle of emotive import; it is a means of cognitive meditation...<sup>10</sup>

In *John*, Jesus makes extensive use of metaphors, as did the writers of the Psalms. And my presentation adds another layer of metaphor to transfer meaning in the text to our contemporary Australian context.

Am I proposing that my presentation encourage sentiment to govern intellect? No; but I do believe in ‘thinking with the heart’. Do I seek to manipulate readers’ emotions? Again, no – but I do seek to foster *affect*. While in Alice Springs recently, researching my current *Psalms* project, I came across Jennifer Loureide Biddle’s *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: Central Desert Art as Experience*. In it she writes, firstly about the Central Desert country, relevant also to the semi-arid region I depict:

... country is sentient, alive, sensuous to those who can recognise it and know it. My aim is to show how it is that country is made sentient, alive, sensuous through the practice of art.<sup>11</sup>

I want to faithfully reflect the living landscape, although always as service to the text.

Secondly, she describes *affect*:

affect is generated not because of the representation of emotion but because of its capacity to engender response... Affect tells us that we are sensory beings who feel, sense, smell – respond – as a primary mode of engagement...

[W]hat is crucial about affect in art is precisely that it may operate at a pre- or extra-linguistic level prior to or outside the normative and structured constraints of language, discourse... As Adam Frank (2004) makes clear, while affective and

cognitive capacities may be distinct, they are deeply interdependent and intimately related.<sup>12</sup>

I realise that I was catching a snippet of a conversation I have not heard before, and aware that I have appropriated it without researching the whole. But now I see that *affect* is the goal of my artworks in their ministry to the text.

*Looking at the paintings on exhibition:*

Frame 1: pages 4-5 (John 1:19-34 the testimony of John ‘Behold the lamb of God’):  
*Lamb in a thicket: sheep and lambs grazing near a creekbed on the Silverton road, and red-tailed black cockatoo*

Frame 2: pages 12-13 (John 4:1-14 Jesus talks to Samaritan woman at the well)  
*Underground creek surfaces in Brachina Gorge, Flinders Ranges: living water welling up to eternal life.* It is muddy and unimpressive, yet life-saving – like most of our Christian lives

Frame 3: Two healings: the paralysed man waiting for the water to stir in Bethesda pool, pages 16-17 (John 5:1-15); and the blind man washed in the pool of Siloam (*Sent*) 30-31 (John 9:1-7)

Left *Moving water: ripples on the dam at Copi Hollow*

Right *the pool Sent to heal: reflected light (Copi Hollow billabong)*

Frame 4: page 27 (John 7:37–8:12 Jesus’ declaration at the Feast of Tabernacles that he is the light of the world and offering the water of eternal life) *Light and water: sunset at Copi Hollow*

Frame 5: pages 32-33 (John 9:8–10:21 ‘I am the good shepherd’, echoing Psalm 23) *In the Father’s care: emu and his chicks.* Father emus, rather than mothers, raise their chicks.

Frame 6: Last Supper discourse II pages 48-49 *Abiding* (John 15:1-11) and 50-51 *the coming of the Spirit (Paraclete)* (John 15:12–16:33)

Top *Another Paraclete: Red-tailed black cockatoo*


Bottom *Abiding in abundance: Menindee landscape*

Frame 7: pages 58-59 (John 19:23-42 Jesus ‘lifted up’ at the time of the lambs’ slaughter for the Passover feast – his crucifixion in a garden)

Top *In a garden, lifted up: lamb on a dam wall out of Broken Hill*

Lower *Colours of blood and glory: feathers of the red-tailed black cockatoo, Sturt desert pea, emu bush, quandong, native hibiscus, hardenbergia and saltbush*

Frame 8: pages 60-61 (John 20:1-18 Jesus’ dawn resurrection from the cave in the garden reminiscent of Eden)



Top *New Creation dawn in the garden: Mutawintji and red-rumped parrots*  
Bottom: Specimen drawings *Colours of royalty and light: mistletoe, wattles, cassias, native apricot, emu bush, rock sida and quandong*

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ryken, Leland, 1984: 91, *How to read the Bible as literature – and get more out of it* Zondervan: Grand Rapids
- <sup>2</sup> Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, 1987:1-2, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* Collins: London
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid*3, 5
- <sup>4</sup> Kysar, Robert, 2002:45-46, *Preaching John* Fortress: Minneapolis
- <sup>5</sup> Brown, William, 2002:11, 13, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* Westminster: John Knox Press Louisville Kentucky
- <sup>6</sup> St Johns Bible [www.saintjohnsbible.org](http://www.saintjohnsbible.org) accessed 6/6/16
- <sup>7</sup> Stibbe, Mark WG, 1994:130, *John's Gospel*/Routledge: London
- <sup>8</sup> Gardner, Thomas, 2011:2, 191, *John in the company of poets* Baylor University Press: Waco Texas
- <sup>9</sup> Naselli, Andy, 2009, *On Swimming Elephants* <http://andynaselli.com/on-swimming-elephants>, accessed 2/9/2013
- <sup>10</sup> Brown, William, 2002:5, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* Westminster: John Knox Press Louisville Kentucky
- <sup>11</sup> Biddle, Jennifer Loureide, no date 13, *Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: Central Desert Art as Experience* UNSW Press: Sydney
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid*15-17