

I AM

LESSON TWO

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

JOHN 8:12-20

D. A. Carson, In the *Pillar Commentary*, discusses not only Jesus's statement about being light, but also the response of the Pharisees.

Note on the setting:

Despite the best efforts of Zane Hodges to prove that this narrative was originally part of John's Gospel, the evidence is against him, and modern English versions are right to rule it off from the rest of the text (NIV) or to relegate it to a footnote (RSV). These verses are present in most of the medieval Greek miniscule manuscripts, but they are absent from virtually all early Greek manuscripts that have come down to us, representing great diversity of textual traditions. The most notable exception is the Western uncial D, known for its independence in numerous other places. They are also missing from the earliest forms of the Syriac and Coptic Gospels, and from many Old Latin, Old Georgian and Armenian manuscripts. All the early church Fathers omit this narrative: in commenting on John, they pass immediately from 7:52 to 8:12. No Eastern Father cites the passage before the tenth century. Didymus the Blind (a fourth-century exegete from Alexandria) reports a variation on this narrative, not the narrative as we have it here. Moreover, a number of (later) manuscripts that include the narrative mark it off with asterisks or obeli, indicating hesitation as to its authenticity, while those that do include it display a rather high frequency of textual variants. Although most of the manuscripts that include the story place it here (i.e. at 7:53-8:11), some place it instead after Luke 21:38, and other witnesses variously place it after John 7:44, John 7:36 or John 21:25. The diversity of placement confirms the inauthenticity of the verses. Finally, even if someone should decide that the material is authentic, it would be very difficult to justify the view that the material is authentically Johannine: there are numerous expressions and constructions that are found nowhere in John, but which are characteristic of the Synoptic Gospels, Luke in particular (cf. notes, below).

On the other hand, there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books. Similar stories are found in other sources. One of the best known, reported by Papias (and recorded by the historian Eusebius, H.E. III. xxxix. 16), is the account of a woman, accused in the Lord's presence of many sins (unlike the woman here who is accused of but one). The narrative before us also has a number of parallels (some of them noted below) with stories in the Synoptic Gospels. The reason for its insertion here may have been to illustrate 7:24 and 8:15 or, conceivably, the Jews' sinfulness over against Jesus' sinlessness (8:21, 24, 46).

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8:12. If we assume that when John wrote his Gospel he did not include (and may not have known the material of) 7:53-8:11, then 8:12 attaches itself to 7:52. Further, if the uncertainty that finds expression in 7:40-44 and the sharp exchanges in the Sanhedrin in 7:45-52 are removed from Jesus' public utterances, then 8:12 follows on nicely from 7:37-39. That is what is indicated by the word *again* (*palin*, which is the first word in the Gk. text of 8:12): *again* he spoke to the people, still in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles.

'He who has not seen the joy of the place of water-drawing has never in his life seen joy': this extravagant claim stands just before the description of the lighting of the four huge lamps in the temple's court of women and of the exuberant celebration that took place under their light (Mishnah *Sukkah* 5:1-4). 'Men of piety and good works' danced through the night, holding burning torches in their hands and singing songs and praises. The Levitical orchestras cut loose, and some sources attest that this went on every night of the Feast of Tabernacles, with the light from the temple area shedding its glow all over Jerusalem. In this context Jesus declares to the people, *I am the light of the world*.

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This is the second of the 'I am' statements that are followed by a predicate (*cf.* notes on 6:35). Of the incarnate Word we have already learned that the life 'was the light of men' (*cf.* notes on 1:4). The light metaphor is steeped in Old Testament allusions. The glory of the very presence of God in the cloud led the people to the promised land (Ex. 13:21-22) and protected them from those who would destroy them (Ex. 14:19-25). The Israelites were trained to sing, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation' (Ps. 27:1). The word of God, the law of God, is a light to guide the path of those who cherish instruction (Ps. 119:105; Pr. 6:23); God's light is shed abroad in revelation (Ezk. 1:4, 13, 26-28) and salvation (Hab. 3:3-4). 'Light is Yahweh in action, Ps. 44:3' (H. Conzelmann, TDNT 9, 320). Isaiah tells us that the servant of the Lord was appointed as a light to the Gentiles, that he might bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth (Is. 49:6). The coming eschatological age would be a time when the Lord himself would be the light for his people (Is. 60:19-22; *cf.* Rev. 21:23-24). Perhaps Zechariah 14:5b-7 is especially significant, with its promise of continual light on the last day, followed by the promise of living waters flowing from Jerusalem—this passage probably forming part of the liturgical readings of this Feast (*cf.* notes on 7:37-39). The great, burning lights of the Feast of Tabernacles resonate with such strains. Already in the Fourth Gospel the dawning of the light in the coming of Jesus has been a significant theme. In this age of an inaugurated but not yet consummated kingdom, however, the light is still in mortal combat with darkness (1:4, 9; 3:19-21).

In fact, light is so common a religious symbol that commentators can find roughly parallel passages in a wide diversity of religious backgrounds that John may well have been exposed to (*cf.* Barrett, pp. 335-337; Dodd, *IFG*, pp. 201-298; Odeberg, pp. 286-292; Bultmann, pp. 40-44, 342-343).¹ Insofar as some of his readers have been reared in one or more of these religious contexts, John would not be adverse to pointing out the ways in which Jesus is the *true* light. But the Gospel is strongly Jewish, and the struggle over claims to authority are with Jews who wish to maintain as paramount their received tradition. That must be the primary locus of the debate that interests the Evangelist, as well as the locus of debate during Jesus' life and ministry.

In the context of such powerful ritual, Jesus' declaration must have come with stunning force. He does not let it hang in the air as an abstract dictum. There is an immediate consequence: *Whoever follows me* (an appropriate thing to do with light if it is the glorious pillar of cloud setting out the way in the wilderness) *will never walk in darkness* (*cf.* 1:5, 9; 3:19-21; 12:35, 46) *but will have the light of life—i.e.* the light that produces life (*cf.* notes on 'bread of life', 6:35; *cf.* Ps. 36:9, 'For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.').

That is as far as the theme is explicitly taken in this chapter. The interest now turns to the authority of Jesus in making such a claim. Nevertheless the verse is strategically placed, for it not only rounds out Jesus' claims in connection with the Feast of Tabernacles, but prepares the way for ch. 9, where the outworking of Jesus' claim to be the light (*cf.* 9:5) is depicted in a miracle by which a blind man is made to see, while others who think they see remain blind to the light. More important to the immediate context, the theme of light is not unrelated to the question of truthfulness and witness in the following verses, for light cannot but attest to its own presence; otherwise put, it bears witness to itself, and its source is entirely supportive of that witness.

8:13. When *the Pharisees* (*cf.* notes on 1:19, 24) challenge him, they bring up Jesus' own words. 'If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid' (5:31). Certainly the law of Moses required multiple attestation in capital cases (Dt. 17:6), and in other criminal proceedings as well (Dt. 19:15). In the Mishnah (*Ketuboth* 2:9) the principle is adopted and applied to other legal situations.

8:14. But in fact, the Pharisees have misunderstood Jesus' earlier utterance (*cf.* notes on 5:31). He was certainly not saying that if he spoke without supporting witness he was necessarily a liar, but that if he testified about himself—*i.e.* outside the framework he had just established, in which everything he says is nothing more and nothing less than what the Father gives him to say—then of course the kind of claims he was making could not possibly be true. Sadly, the Pharisees have understood his words in a purely juridical sense, as if he were interested in nothing more than establishing the legal criteria for acceptable testimony. So Jesus goes over the same ground he has been over before (5:19-30,

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36–37), using slightly different terms. He can, he says, offer true (*alethes*, cf. notes on 5:31) testimony concerning himself, because he knows his unique origin and destiny (an important theme in the Fourth Gospel: cf. 3:11–13; 7:27–28, 34–35; 9:29–30; 13:1, 36–38; 14:4ff.; 16:5, 28; 19:9). His opponents have no right to speak, since they do not know where he came from (*viz.* the Father, 5:36–37; 16:28) nor where he is going (*viz.* the Father, 13:1; 16:28; 17:5). He will shortly point out once more that even in these claims he is not speaking in naked independence, but is speaking in perfect conformity with the Father’s will (vv. 16, 18).

8:15. Sadly, in assessing who Jesus is, his opponents are judging *by human standards* (*kata ten sarka*, lit. ‘according to the flesh’). This is probably even worse than judging ‘by mere appearances’ (7:24); here they are resorting to the criteria of flesh, of fallen mankind in a fallen world, without the compelling control of the Spirit (cf. 3:3–7). They see his ‘flesh’, as it were, but never contemplate the possibility that he could be the Word made flesh (1:14). To regard Christ by so limited a set of criteria is to weigh him ‘from a worldly point of view’ (2 Cor. 5:16; *kata sarka*). As for himself, Jesus declares, *I pass judgment on no-one*. It will not do (with Bruce, p. 189, and others) to argue that Jesus changes the meaning of the verb *krino* here from ‘assess’ to ‘pass judicial sentence’, and conclude that Jesus does *not* judge in the sense that he came into the world to save, not to condemn 3:17. That is true, of course, but the line of thought would be the merest pun. Jesus means, rather, that he does not judge anyone at all *the way his opponents do*—i.e. he does not appeal to superficial, ‘fleshly’ criteria, and accordingly mark people up or down. If that is what his opponents mean by judging, Jesus does not do any of it. Indeed, as Bernard (1. 295) remarks, the Synoptics record the charge that Jesus was not discriminating enough (Mk. 2:16; Lk. 7:39; 15:2; cf. Jn. 8:11).

8:16. But that does not mean that Jesus does not judge in *any* sense. His purpose was to save, not to condemn, but his very presence guarantees that humanity divides around him, and a large part of it is correspondingly judged by him (cf. 9:39). Indeed, the Son of Man has been given unique authority to judge (5:27), precisely because of who he is. And quite apart from eschatological judgment, if Jesus assesses, even now, a person or situation, his judgment will inevitably prove *right* (*alethine*, i.e. genuine, ultimate, and therefore right), because in this area as in every other Jesus does not stand alone but with the Father who sent him. Jesus judges only as he hears from the Father, and thus his judgment is just (cf. notes on 5:30).

8:17–18. Because of this, even the formal conditions of the law (cf. 13) are met: the Father and the Son, in perfect agreement, both bear testimony, in the sense already established (cf. notes on 5:19–30, 36–37).

Not a few commentators think it historically implausible that Jesus could ever have so distanced himself from the law of Moses as to refer to it as *your law*. In their view the terminology betrays the growing hostility between the church and the synagogue. But as in 7:19 (cf. notes there), *your law* seems appropriate precisely because the Pharisees are appealing to that law to question Jesus’ practice, while Jesus is claiming to be the new locus of revelation from the Father such that the law finds fulfillment in him. Unless one is arbitrarily prepared to argue that Jesus had no consciousness of his unique role in the sweep of redemptive history, in his role as the agent of creation (1:3), in his pre-existence (8:58), it would be astonishing if he had not distanced himself from the law at certain points.

The words *I am one who testifies* formally constitutes another ‘I am’ saying, but in Greek it is structurally rather different from those listed in the notes on 6:35. The words do not so much identify Jesus as a particular individual (someone called ‘the testifier’ or the like) as they identify his peculiar qualifications: he is peculiarly the *one who testifies*, with full qualifications for doing so, for the reasons specified in vv. 14, 16. The other one qualified to do so is the Father (the Holy Spirit will be added as a qualified witness in chs. 14–16).

8:19. Not infrequently in John, Jesus says something profound only to have it misinterpreted by others. So here: Jesus has been explicating the unique relation he enjoys with his heavenly Father as

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he bears witness to the truth, and his opponents want the Father identified, apparently thinking on a purely human plane. As elsewhere, the misunderstanding leads to further explanations, though in this instance they are delayed for a few verses. Nevertheless, the 'Father' theme, and the corresponding question as to what paternity Jesus and the Pharisees may legitimately claim, dominates the rest of the chapter. For the moment, Jesus responds with an accusation akin to 5:37–38. By their question the Pharisees are admitting that they really do not know who Jesus is, despite the earlier claims of some Jerusalemites (7:27). Worse, their inability to recognize Jesus testifies that they really do not know God himself (cf. 1:18; 5:38; 14:7, 9). How could they? They were still judging 'by human standards' (v. 15). If they had really recognized who he was, they would have known the Father also—not only because Jesus reveals the Father, so that truly to know Jesus is to know the Father, but also because special revelation from God is required to know who Jesus is (6:44, 45).

8:20. The Evangelist rounds off this exchange by identifying the setting (a pattern he has followed elsewhere: cf. 6:59). The *place where the offerings were put* probably refers to the thirteen 'shofar-chests' (probably so named because the 'chests' were shaped like shofars (Heb. *šōpar*), a trumpet; cf. Mishnah *Shekalim* 2:1; 6:1, 5). Each was inscribed with the use to which the money collected in it was ostensibly put. Nowhere do we learn explicitly where they were placed, but probably they were located in the Court of the Women, if we may judge from access women had to them (cf. Mk. 12:41–42; cf. SB 2. 37–45). John's principal point is that *no-one seized him, because his time (hora) had not yet come*. Cf. notes on 2:4; 7:6, 30. The assumption, of course, is that the animus against Jesus in some circles had not abated, but had increased, and was biding its time. But the right 'hour' (*hora*) would be determined by God himself.¹

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Colin Kruse, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, explains how Jesus is the light:

12. The evangelist continues, *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world.'* This is the second of seven different 'I am' sayings with predicates in the Fourth Gospel (6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Jesus' claim to be 'the light of the world' was made against the background of another Jewish practice at the Feast of Tabernacles, the great candle-lighting ceremonies that took place each night except on an intervening sabbath. A passage from the Mishnah (*Sukkah* 5:2–3) describes these ceremonies:

At the close of the first Festival-day of the Feast they went down to the Court of the Women where they had made a great amendment. There were golden candlesticks there with four golden bowls on the top of them and four ladders to each candlestick, and four youths of the priestly stock and in their hands jars of oil holding a hundred and twenty *logs* which they poured into all the bowls. They made wicks from the worn out drawers and girdles of the priests and with them they set the candlesticks alight, and there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light of the Beth ha-She'ubah.

Jesus presented himself as the light of the world at the Feast of Tabernacles; a festival during which great candles lit up the courtyards of Jerusalem every night. However, Jesus' claim to be the light of the world contained more than allusions to the great illuminations of the Feast of Tabernacles. It had its roots in OT prophecies, especially Isaiah 42:6; 49:6 and 51:4, which speak of the Servant of the Lord, and indeed the Lord himself, as the light to the nations (world).

Jesus promised, *Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*. Those who followed him by accepting his teaching would no longer walk in the darkness of ignorance under the power of the evil one (cf. 1 John 5:19). As the apostle Paul said, 'he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves' (Col. 1:13). As life in the

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 333–334, 337–341.

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darkness culminates in death, life in the light of Christ culminates in eternal life; it is 'the light of *life*'. In the Prologue the evangelist said of the Logos, 'In him was life, and that life was the light of men' (1:4). To come to Christ means coming to the one in whom is found the life of God, and that life is the light of men, the light of life.

13. Not all were willing to accept Jesus' claim to be the light of the world. *The Pharisees challenged him, 'Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.'* According to rabbinic teaching, testimony to oneself was not valid in law; only testimony by another could be accepted. In the Mishnah, for example, we read, 'So, too, if there were two men and one said, "I am a priest", and the other said, "I am a priest", they may not be believed; but when they testify thus of each other they may be believed' (*Ketubot* 2:7). The Pharisees accused Jesus of bearing testimony to himself.

14. In response, *Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going.'* As the one who has come from God and is going to God (cf. 13:3), he is not subject to rabbinic rules concerning valid testimony. Even though he might accommodate himself to their rules (5:31-46; 8:17-18) he did not need to do so. What rendered Jesus' testimony valid was something of which his opponents were completely ignorant: *But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going.* They did not understand that he had been sent by God into the world and that he would shortly return to God. The testimony of God's emissary did not need human validation.

15-16. Confronting his opponents, Jesus said, *You judge by human standards.* Because they rejected the light of the world, the Pharisees were shut up to fallible human wisdom when they made judgments, and in respect of Jesus' teaching they were sadly mistaken. While his opponents judged him by human standards, Jesus said, *I pass judgment on no-one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me.* Jesus did not come to judge or condemn the world, but to save it, so he reserved judgment. However, he insisted that if he were to judge, his decisions would be correct, because, unlike the Pharisees, he stood with the Father, and his judgments would be in accordance with his Father's will.

17-18. Alluding to Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15, Jesus said, *In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid.* The testimony of one person is no basis for convicting anyone of a crime; there must be two or three witnesses. When Jesus spoke of 'your own law' he was not distancing himself from the law of the Pharisees, for it was his law also. In the OT Moses and Joshua spoke to the Israelites of 'your God', and of 'the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers has given you', without distancing themselves from either God or the land (Deut. 1:10, 21; Josh. 18:3). Jesus was reminding the Pharisees of the provisions of the law, which both he and they accepted.

The law says the testimony of two witnesses is valid, and Jesus insisted that he was not a lone witness: *I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me.* Readers know that there could be no more valid witnesses than God the Father and his unique and only Son. Jesus had other witnesses as well (John the Baptist, the works Jesus performed, the Scriptures, and Moses; 5:31-47) but they were not of the same order as Jesus himself and the Father.

19. The Pharisees thought Jesus was appealing to a human father as his second witness: *they asked him, 'Where is your father?'* Jesus' response related, not to the question 'Where is your father', but to the fact that they did not know his Father: *You do not know me or my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.* If they realized he was speaking of God, this would have been exceedingly confronting to the Pharisees, who were proud of their knowledge of God (see Deut. 4:7; Rom. 2:17). The evidence that they did not 'know' the Father was that they did not know Jesus. They did not realize that those who see Jesus see the Father also, something Jesus would explain to his disciples during the Last Supper (14:8-10).

20. The evangelist concludes this part of his account by describing the place where Jesus' exchange with the Pharisees took place: *He spoke these words while teaching in the temple area near the*

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place where the offerings were put. The words translated ‘the place where the offerings were put’ (to *gazophylakio*) literally rendered would be ‘the treasury’. Josephus uses *gazophylakion* for the treasury chambers, where vast sums of money were stored (Jewish War v.200; vi.282). Jesus would neither have had access to nor have taught in these rooms. The same word is used in Mark 12:41, 43 and Luke 21:1 for the boxes into which people placed their offerings. The niv rendering assumes Jesus was teaching near these boxes. It was a public place, probably in the Court of Women (see Mark 12:41-44), the place where the great candelabra were lit at night during the Feast of Tabernacles—an appropriate place for Jesus’ proclamation that he was ‘the light of the world’.

Despite the fact that the Pharisees rejected his teaching and thought it was dangerous, *Yet no-one seized him, because his time had not yet come.* This is the third of nine references to Jesus’ ‘hour/time’ (2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27 [2×]; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1), a significant theme in this Gospel. The first three references all say that Jesus’ hour had not yet come, the last six indicate that it had come. The hour towards which everything moves is the hour of Jesus’ glorification, which took place through his death, resurrection and exaltation. This ‘hour’ was determined by God, not Jesus’ opponents. Once again, therefore, the evangelist says ‘no-one seized him, because his time had not yet come’.²

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*
David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*
Richard D. Phillips, *John*, Reformed Expository Commentary
Colin G. Kruse, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Gerald Borchert, *John*, New Application Commentary
Jey J. Kanagaraj, *John*, New Covenant Commentary Series
Rodney Whitacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary
Bruce Milne, *The Message of John*, The Bible Speaks Today
Grant Osborne, *John*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary
Barclay Newman and Eugene Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, UBSH

²Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 200-204.