

APPROACHING THE FOURTH GOSPEL*

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I. Fluctuating Perspectives on John

Depending on the story-teller, the development of modern biblical scholarship can appear unbearably dull or altogether engrossing. It would take some effort, however, to review the vicissitudes of the Gospel of John during the past two centuries without succumbing to the fascination of this subject.

Consider the question of historical value. How does one account for the fact that, while at the beginning of the 19th century the Fourth Gospel was almost universally regarded as the most valuable source for the life of Jesus, few critics by the end of the century thought that it provided any significant historical information at all? And what has caused scholars in the 20th century to move in a more conservative direction, so that it is no longer disreputable to argue that this document contains some amount of independent, reliable material?

Or take the related issue of date of composition. The traditional view that the Gospel was written toward the end of the 1st century gave way to a remarkable theory that pushed the date well into the middle of the 2nd century. The well-known discovery in 1933 of the Rylands Fragment (papyrus 52, containing only a few verses from John 18), which can be dated firmly no later than A.D. 135, seemed magically to restore the Gospel to its traditional setting. Yet more recent research has suggested, to at least one prominent scholar, that a

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date prior to A.D. 70 is reasonable, and that therefore the Gospel of John may well be as ancient as Mark!¹

And what does one do with the wild divergences that have characterized modern explanations regarding the origin of this document? The old and straightforward view that the Apostle John, as eyewitness of the events, composed it in Ephesus near the end of his life was displaced by attempts to attribute the work to a non-Palestinian, Hellenistic author deeply influenced by gnostic thought.² The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls showed that many features used as evidence for a Hellenistic background did not at all contradict a Palestinian setting, and alternate theories have surfaced in the last several decades. Particularly influential has been the attempt to see the Fourth Gospel as the product of a 1st-century Christian community, somehow or other related to the Apostle John perhaps, though this theory comes in many variations.

The controversy does not end here. Did the author (or redactor?) use the other Gospels for some of his material or was his composition quite independent of the synoptic tradition? Was his work characterized by bringing together earlier sources or by composing an original, unified document? Did he address unbelievers in order to evangelize them or did he rather have in mind strengthening the faith of those who already believed? Did he emphasize the miracles of Christ as signs that lead to faith or as obstacles on the way to faith? The issues appear to continue on indefinitely.

As far as the ancient church was concerned, the answers to most of these questions were not in doubt, and while we are under no obligation--historical or theological--to accept the views of 2nd-century believers, it would be foolhardy to ignore the evidential value afforded by certain aspects of that consensus. In short, one must recognize that the *external* evidence attesting to the authorship of John is ancient, clear, and explicit. Even in the midst of serious debates in the early church, no real evidence can be found for someone other than John the Apostle having written it.

Irenaeus, for example, begins his discussion of the origins of this Gospel (in a passage where he argues that it was written to combat Cerinthus and his heresy) with a straight reference to John, that is,

¹ See J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976) chap 9. On p. 307 he suggests that a primitive form of the Gospel of John had taken shape in Jerusalem by A.D. 50, that a proper edition had been completed in Asia Minor by the year 55, and that it was given final form in the late 60s. In a posthumously published work, *The Priority of John* (ed. J. F. Coakly; London: SCM, 1985), Robinson developed these ideas more fully.

² This approach can best be seen in R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971 [orig. 1950]). See further below.

without attempting to defend that view or even suggesting that it was disputed by anyone.³ Roughly contemporary, but proceeding from a very different geographical setting (and thus providing broad and independent testimony), is Clement of Alexandria's comment that "last of all John, aware that the external facts [τὰ σωματικά] had been made plain in the [synoptic] Gospels, was urged by friends and inspired by the Spirit to compose a spiritual Gospel."⁴

Other early quotations could be adduced, all of which point in the same direction. For most scholars of antiquity, the uniform character of such early testimony could not be set aside except by alternate evidence of the most persuasive sort; curiously, mainstream biblical scholars tend to place much less confidence on the weight of external data than do their colleagues in classical scholarship.⁵ True, the 2nd-century testimony for the authorship of John is not consistent in every respect--one of the key quotations contains a puzzling ambiguity.⁶ But the appeal to these variable elements misses the central point: the ancient church does not appear to have debated the issue of Johannine authorship. Considering especially the theological divisiveness that centered on the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, the question must be asked why we find no attempts to defend the Johannine authorship of this book against specific attacks. The only viable answer is that by the middle of 2nd century John's authorship was universally recognized: there was no competing figure and no alternative theory.

Throughout the centuries, therefore, it was taken for granted that the Fourth Gospel had special value not only as a theological document but also as a historical source for the life and teachings of

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11: This section contains his well-known analogy of the Gospels (four corners of the earth, four winds, four living creatures, and four covenants), which does reflect some kind of theological controversy, but not with regard to authorship.

⁴ Quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.7. Elsewhere (3.24.7-8, LCC translation) Eusebius reports: "John, it is said, used all the time a message which was not written down, and at last took to writing for the following cause. The three gospels which had been written down before were distributed to all including himself; it is said that he welcomed them and testified to their truth but said that there was only lacking to the narrative the account of what was done by Christ at first and at the beginning of the preaching. The story is surely true."

⁵ Cf. G. Kennedy, "Classical and Christian Source Criticism," *The Relationship among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. W. W. Walker, Jr.; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978) 125-55, esp. 147-52.

⁶ In particular, the earliest witness (that of Papias, quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3-4) can, but need not, be interpreted as making a distinction between John the Apostle and another John. See especially the analysis by R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 611-16.

Jesus--a work written by an eyewitness to supplement the synoptics. In modern times isolated arguments against the Gospel's authenticity began to appear, and most of these were collected in 1820 by a certain K. G. (C. Th.) Bretschneider, though with little effect, since F. Schleiermacher's heavy dependence on John proved quite influential. The work of D. F. Strauss, however, dealt a heavy blow to the Gospel's credibility, and this new viewpoint was thought to be confirmed by the Marcan hypothesis of synoptic origins.⁷ By the end of the century, it was commonly assumed that the Fourth Gospel could not have been written by an apostle or by an eyewitness at all, and the rise of the History of Religions school further encouraged many scholars to attribute the Gospel's composition to an unknown theologian who lived in the 2nd century. Combined with a concern with the possible sources used by the evangelist, the view that the Gospel of John is a late Hellenistic document was given definitive expression by R. Bultmann.⁸

As already pointed out, the second quarter of this century began to witness a significant shift that led to the so-called new look on the Fourth Gospel.⁹ By the phrase is not meant a return to apostolic authorship, nor to complete historicity, but a viewpoint that allows for the strong possibility that genuine Johannine tradition lies behind the Gospel. The term Johannine tradition (or community) becomes the pivotal issue, and scholars have been devoting their energies to reconstructing the historical situation at the end of the 1st century that gave rise to the Gospel--a subject that will occupy us again shortly.

II. *General Purpose*

Misjudging a writer's (or a speaker's) intention can very easily lead to a distortion of the material being interpreted. It is therefore valid and essential for scholars to inquire into the purpose of biblical writings, and for this task we are usually dependent on internal evidence, since explicit statements are rare. True, the Gospel of John provides an explicit statement of purpose ("that you may believe," 20:31), yet ironically there is more controversy on this issue than there is perhaps with regard to the purpose of any other NT book! Indeed, not a few scholars disregard the significance of 20:31 altogether.¹⁰

⁷ Cf. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1969 [orig. 1906]) 85-87, 12.5-28.

⁸ See above, n. 2.

⁹ J. A. T. Robinson, "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," *SE* 1. (1959) 338-50.

¹⁰ Cf. R. Kysar, *The Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 14-15, Following Fortna, Kysar thinks that the statement belonged to a signs source but becomes inadequate as a description of the whole book.

The basic concern among scholars is that the Gospel, as it stands, looks much too complicated to be viewed as an evangelistic document: unbelievers could not possibly understand the numerous subtleties in the text. Many scholars who do wish to take 20:31 seriously find it possible to deny a missionary motive in the book's composition by leaning on the present tense of πιστεύητε: "Since here the present would mean 'keep believing,' it would imply that the readers of the Gospel are already Christian believers."¹¹ Correlating this idea with 1 John 5:13, R. E. Brown and others interpret the statement as indicating the goal of deepening the faith of the disciples.

The controversy has been vitiated by three problems. (1) In the first place, we have a serious textual ambiguity. The decision between the present and the aorist variant is sufficiently difficult that it would seem folly to build a case on either reading.¹²

(2) But even if one could be sure of the text, it would still be rash to draw any conclusion from that, since the use of the tenses (i.e., aspects) resists any neat categorization,¹³ In the Gospel of John itself

¹¹ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB 29, 29A; New York: Doubleday, 1966-70) 2.1056. Brown adds that the aorist, attested by most witnesses, "could be translated 'may come to faith,' implying that the readers are not yet Christian." Similarly, L. Morris (*The Gospel According to John* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971] 855-56) states that if the aorist is correct, then an evangelistic aim "is beyond reasonable doubt." This kind of argument is rightly criticized by D. A. Carson, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered," *JBL* 100 (1987) 639-51, esp. 640-41.

¹² Discussions of this textual problem have failed to do what would appear to be the first order of business, namely, isolate those instances of *iva* plus the subjunctive of πιστεύω where there is no textual variation. The relevant passages are 1:7; 6:30; 9:36; 11:15, 42; 14:29. In all of these cases the aorist is used, and so we may infer that the aorist is the characteristic Johannine usage. We can hardly deduce from this fact, however, that the aorist should be preferred in those cases where we do encounter textual variation, for scribes would naturally have tended to assimilate an original present to the characteristic Johannine usage. We should indeed note that there are at least three passages where the original reading is almost certainly the present (17:21 corrected to the aorist by P⁶⁰ **κ**² A C³ D f¹³ and Maj; 19:35; 6:29; probably 13:19 belongs here too, though only B and C have the present). The aorist perhaps made better sense to the scribes in these passages. In any case, there is no comparable evidence to support the view that an original aorist was changed to a present in spite of many opportunities to do so. With some doubts, I would choose the present at 20:31.

¹³ Not surprisingly, several writers qualify their statements with "strictly interpreted" or a similar remark. (Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* [2d ed.; London: SPCK, 1978] 575, and B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1971] 256). Even if we assume the textbook distinction between "keep believing" for the present and "start believing" for the aorist (which in any case is doubtful), we would have to recognize that a writer's usage may vary from that pattern: see especially Mark 5:36 **μόνον πίστευε**, which hardly means "keep believing" (is Luke 8:50 a stylistic "correction"?) and 13:21 **μη πιστεύετε**, which cannot suggest "stop believing" (contrast Matt 24:23).

we should note 6:29 (contrast v 30) and 17:21, where the present is more clearly attested even though Jesus is speaking to unbelievers. On the other hand, at least one passage where the aorist is uncontested (11:15)¹⁴ makes plain that John's usage is not determined by the question whether faith is or is not already present. One needn't be troubled by these apparent "inconsistencies"--no Greek speaker or writer was likely to let an important point hang on such subtle differences. In spite of some grammarians and many preachers, aspectual distinctions do not a sermon make.

(3) But there is a third and more substantive question--the nature of faith. Most writers appear to assume (consciously or not) a polarization between initial and continuing faith, but such a conception can hardly find support in the text of the Gospel itself. This point has been seen clearly by Bultmann, who comments: "So far as the Evangelist is concerned it is irrelevant whether the possible readers are already 'Christians,' or are not yet such; for to him the faith of 'Christians' is not a conviction that is present once for all, but it must perpetually make sure of itself anew, and therefore must continually hear the word anew."¹⁵

Taken at face value, 20:31 does suggest a distinctly (though not exclusively) evangelistic aim, in contrast to 1 John 5:13, which explicitly assumes the presence of faith among the readers. Church history would seem to bear out this understanding of the Gospel. Its theological difficulties notwithstanding, the Gospel of John has always been a primary tool of evangelism. Probably no other book of the Bible is more frequently suggested to unbelievers as a means of becoming acquainted with the basic facts of Christianity. And is it a coincidence that new Bible translations are characteristically introduced with a sample from the Gospel of John?

What needs emphasis, of course, is that John has not written a book to be discarded (like an elementary Greek grammar!) the minute we have acquainted ourselves with its contents. The author surely viewed his material as a source for continued instruction, inspiration, and renewal. In fact, his artistry and uniqueness lies precisely in this, that the Fourth Gospel (to use the oft-quoted characterization) is like a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant swim.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. also 13:19 (see above, n. 12) and note what the textual tradition has done to 10:37-38.

¹⁵ Bultmann, *John*, 698-99. Of course, whether Bultmann's own existentialist conception of faith corresponds to John's is a different question altogether.

¹⁶ This description, attributed to a variety of writers, is apparently ancient, but I have not been able to ascertain its origin.

III. *Specific Occasion*

Even after insisting that the Gospel has in view both evangelism and edification, we have certainly not exhausted all the elements that may have motivated the author and thus played a role in the composition of this document. Unfortunately, these more specific and, I think, subordinate elements cannot be identified apart from a careful exegesis of the book as a whole. Here we are faced with an important example of the so-called hermeneutical circle: our understanding of a particular passage depends on our ability to place that passage within its proper setting or context, yet we cannot confidently describe that context prior to some interpretive work on the text.

To complicate matters, most discussions regarding the origins of the Fourth Gospel come with a heavy dose of speculative ingredients. While some students may justifiably feel put off by this free flow of scholarly imagination, we would make a mistake to ignore the theories altogether. As long as they are understood for what they are--working hypotheses only--they can provide a base for responsible exegesis. At the very least, they will prove stimulating!

Rather than survey the whole landscape, however, it will be worth our while to review briefly what is probably the best known and most influential conjecture. After completing his very detailed and useful commentary on the Gospel of John, and in the midst of preparing a massive commentary on the Johannine epistles, Brown published a popularized synthesis of his conclusions.¹⁷ Brown, who views the Gospel as the result of several stages (from an independent tradition to a distinctive Johannine presentation and then to an actual written Gospel, subsequently revised more than once), associates the final product with a well-defined Christian community that was interacting with six distinct groups:

*Christians of apostolic churches generally: though their Christology was perceived by the Johannine community as insufficiently developed, unity with them was both possible and desirable (cf. John 17:22-23).

*Jewish Christians who depended heavily on signs and who did not accept Christ's deity: the Johannine community did not regard them as true believers (cf. John 6:60-66).

*Crypto-Christians: Jews who, though considering themselves to be Christians, had not even broken with the synagogue (Nicodemus is considered by some, though not by Brown, a prototype of this group).

¹⁷ R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979); note especially the chart on pp. 168-69. Also influential has been J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2d ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

* Adherents of John the Baptist: disciples who viewed the Baptist as more important than Jesus (cf. the "polemic" in John 1:8 and 3:30).

*"The Jews": unbelieving members of the synagogue who persecuted members of the Johannine community and who excommunicated those professing faith in Jesus (cf. John 9:34).

*The world: those who reject the message of Jesus (Jews included).

We should remind ourselves that we have no explicit evidence for such a reconstruction. The groups listed above (as well as the compositional stages undergirding the theory) are pure inferences from the Gospel's text, which of course does not directly address the issues with which we are dealing. Moreover, reconstructions of this sort often suggest that the characters and stories described in the Gospel, insofar as they represent a specific situation at the end of the 1st century, do not necessarily correspond to realities at the time of Jesus' ministry.

With those caveats in mind, we can still appreciate the exegetical value of formulating a plausible setting for the composition of the Gospel. One need not deny the historicity of, say, the healing of the blind man (John 9) to admit the possibility that John recounted that incident because it was distinctively applicable to his situation. The remarkable differences between John and the synoptics must be accounted for in some way. We may fully accept that the incidents recorded by John really took place, but that fact does not answer the question, Why did John choose these incidents and not others? None of the NT books was written in abstraction. Rather, they were composed to meet real and specific needs. Telling the story of Jesus was not motivated by antiquarian interests but by the need to apply that story to concrete problems faced by later believers.

These considerations, incidentally, raise the important question whether the Gospel was written to supplement the synoptics. That John knew and used the other Gospels was taken for granted throughout the history of interpretation as late as the 1st half of this century, though in recent decades such a view has been held by a minority of scholars.¹⁸ Affecting the debate, however, has been the gratuitous assumption that "knowledge of" = "literary dependence on." Happily, a few scholars have made the point that these two elements must be distinguished.¹⁹

¹⁸ The change in perspective was the result primarily of P. Gardner-Smith's work, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge; University Press, 1938). Barrett in his commentary held out for the view that John at least knew Mark, but few have followed him.

¹⁹ See especially B. de Solages, *Jean et les Synoptiques* (Leiden: Brill, 1979). This position, already anticipated by J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin (*A Commentary on the*

Surely no Christian community at the end of the 1st century would have been unaware of the synoptic tradition. Without precisely using Mark, John may well have wanted to provide information not found in that tradition--as Eusebius's remark regarding the content of John suggests.²⁰ One can also argue that John supplements the synoptics theologically by combining several of their themes into one complete picture. Without placing undue emphasis on the specific relationship that may have obtained between John and the synoptics, we may legitimately assume some knowledge of them on his part as well as a desire to provide additional information and interpretation.

IV. *Literary Structure*

How does the author go about achieving his purpose? What tools has he used in putting the material together? The Gospel of John almost seems to invite a distinctive approach in answering these questions: to a greater degree than most other biblical books, this work can be treated as a piece of literature in the narrower sense. Accordingly, much energy has been devoted in recent years to the analysis of its literary character.

Particularly impressive among studies of this sort is R. A. Culpepper's 1983 monograph.²¹ Using some of the standard concepts in the analysis of narrative (real/implied author, implied reader, plot, etc.), Culpepper presents the Fourth Gospel as a carefully crafted piece of art. Inevitably, the question arises whether one may apply to this document--or any of the Gospels for that matter--categories that have been developed for the description of fictional writing. Culpepper

Gospel According to John [HNTC; New York: Harper, 1968] 10), has been accepted by G. R. Beasley-Murray (*John* [Word biblical Commentary 36; Waco, TX: Word, 1987] xxxvii, following D. Moody Smith). The case for John's dependence on all three synoptics is argued capably by F. Neirynck (*Jean et les Synoptiques. Examen critique de l'exegese de M.-E. Boismard* [BETL 49; Louven: University Press, 1979]). On the related question of possible sources used by John, see especially the critique by D. A. Carson, "Current Source Criticism of the Fourth Gospel: Some Methodological Questions," *JBL* 97 (1978) 411-29, esp. 428-29.

²⁰ Cf. above, n. 4.

²¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Foundations and Facets: NT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Different in approach is G. Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel* (AnBib 117; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1987). Other works have attempted to apply the techniques of so-called structuralism, text linguistics, etc., with questionable success. No more persuasive is M. J. J. Menken, *Numerical Literary Techniques in John: The Fourth Evangelist's Use of Numbers of Words and Syllables* (NovTSup 55; Leiden: Brill, 1985).

himself, whatever his views on the historicity of John,²² treats the material as though it had no historical significance and leaves the impression that the real value of the Gospel is the artistry with which the author communicates his message, whether or not there is any factual basis for that message.

Such a conclusion, however, would appear to undermine the author's avowed desire to instruct his readers concerning actual events (John 20:30), to say nothing of the intensity with which he affirms the historicity of his account (see especially 19:35). Of course, we cannot assume that literary techniques used to enhance the dramatic effect of a narrative are the exclusive property of fictional writers. Certainly many of Culpepper's insights shed light on the significance of the text without compromising its historical basis--though we may indeed need to grant the evangelist a greater amount of literary flexibility than we have been accustomed to.

In any case, we may accept that the evangelist has exercised special care in the composition of this Gospel. Can we proceed to determine whether it can be "outlined"? The task of outlining a book should be seen as an effort to place passages in their proper context, since ascertaining the connection of a statement to what precedes and follows it is essential to its proper interpretation. Accordingly, a good outline does not merely describe contents but reveals the progression of the argument. And although we aim to approximate the author's own thought, several different outlines may be "equally" valid--though perhaps not equally helpful.

Now one finds, with regard to the Gospel of John, almost universal agreement (a) that a prologue and an epilogue should be recognized as discrete sections and (b) that a major break occurs between chaps 12 and 13. Among points of disagreement we should note the question whether the body of the book begins at 1:19 or 2:1 and the debate whether chaps 18-20 constitute a third major section. Another issue that deserves comment is the well-known observation that chaps 2-12 appear to contain seven signs (2:1-12; 4:46-54; 5:1-15; 6:1-15, 16-21; 9:1-14; 11:lff.) and seven discourses (3:1-21; 4:1-26; 5:16-47; 6:22-59; 7-8; 9:35-10:21; 12:20-36). Indeed, some scholars (e.g., Morris) have tried to structure the Gospel by using either or both of these sets, though one can argue that such a move obscures other, more fundamental, themes. Using C. H. Dodd's important analysis as a point of departure, we may suggest the following outline.

²² Culpepper explicitly states that he does not wish to deny "any historical core or matrix of the gospel" (*ibid.*, p. 11), and at the end of the book he deplores the common divorce between fiction and truth (pp. 234-37).

Note in particular the significance of geographical notes in the first sections and the contrast between chaps 9-12 and chap 20.

- Introduction (Chap 1)
 - Prologue (1:1-18)
 - Testimony (1:19-51)
- Jesus Reveals His Glory to the World (Chaps 2-12)
 - The New Order (Chaps 2-4)
 - Cana (2:1-11)
 - Jerusalem/Judea (2:13-3:36)
 - Samaria (4:1-42)
 - Cana (4:43-54)
 - The Life-Giver (Chaps 5-8)
 - Jerusalem (Chap 5)
 - Galilee (Chap 6)
 - Jerusalem (Chaps 7-8)
 - The World's Unbelief (Chaps 9-12)
 - Blind and faithless leaders (Chaps 9-10)
 - The raising of Lazarus (Chap 11)
 - Life through death (Chap 12)
- Jesus Reveals His Glory to the Disciples (Chaps 13-20)
 - The Last Evening (Chaps 13-17)
 - Lowly service and Jesus' comfort (Chaps 13-14)
 - Final instructions (Chaps 15-16)
 - Intercessory prayer (Chap 17).
 - The Passion (Chaps 18-19)
 - Arrest and trials (Chap 18)
 - Crucifixion and burial (Chap 19)
 - The Disciples' Faith (Chap 20)
- Epilogue (Chap 21)

V. John and the Old Testament

Careful attention to the literary character of the Fourth Gospel will quickly reveal how pervasive has been the influence of the OT in its composition.²³ The point is particularly significant in that the law-gospel polemic is prominent in it as well. The strong and well-known antithesis of 1:17 ("the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ") has to be understood in the light of 5:46

²³In addition to numerous specific studies, cf. the synthesis by E. D. Freed, *Old Testament Quotations in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

("if you believed Moses, you would believe me"). The new order instituted by Christ must be seen as a fulfilment, not a rejection, of the OT message.

Other articles in the present issue will develop some of the theological themes in the Gospel of John and so we need not pursue this matter here. It may be useful, nevertheless, to illustrate the impact that the OT has had in the very structuring of John's narrative. Chap 6 provides one of the best examples, since the Exodus 16 background is indisputable.

Exodus 16 itself is part of a larger narrative (Exod 15:22-17:7) that emphasizes the goodness of YHWH in providing for his people. Three incidents are recorded here:

- (1) In Exod 15:22-27 the people are thirsty and all the water they find is bitter; God was testing them, but they grumble in their trial; still, the Lord provides drinking water for them.
- (2) In chap 16 the people are hungry and they grumble again (vv 3, 7); this incident is also described as a time of testing (v 4), and the Lord provides manna for their needs (vv 13-16).
- (3) Chap 17 records another incident when the people are thirsty; their grumbling is more serious, since now they turn the tables on God by testing him (vv 2-3); the Lord's generosity is even more dramatic, since he, who is the Rock, stands on the rock of Horeb, ready to be struck so that the people may have water to drink (v 6).

Of course, the trial of the Israelites in the wilderness corresponds to Adam's temptation, a point made subtly in the narrative by the use in 16:15 of a phrase taken from Gen 1:29.²⁴ Moreover, 16:23 appears to connect the giving of the manna to the Passover celebration by the use of another phrase taken from Exod 12:6.²⁵ Not surprisingly, the Exodus 16 narrative became charged with eschatological expectations. Within the pages of the OT itself, the giving of the Spirit (mentioned in the corresponding passage in Num 11:17) is tied to the giving of manna and water (Neh 9:20). The apocryphal work 2 Baruch promises that "the treasury of manna will again descend from on high" (29:8), while the later rabbinic midrashim reflect an explicit messianic interpretation.²⁶

²⁴ The phrase is "for you for food" (לכם לאכלה). I owe these observations to the important work of U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967 [orig. 1951]) 196, 198.

²⁵ "For you for keeping" (לכם למשמרה).

²⁶ Note in particular the Midrash on Eccl 1:9, "as the first redeemer caused manna to descend, so will the latter redeemer cause manna to descend." For these and other references see Brown, *John*, 1.265.

As we turn our attention to John, we may wonder whether he structured his narrative with a view to paralleling Exodus 15-17. Just as that passage speaks of God's providing water-manna-water, so John presents Jesus (who was already identified as YHWH in 1:14, alluding to Exod 34:6) as the one who provides his people with water (John 4:13-14), manna (6:32-35), and water (7:37-38). John makes a point of advising us that the feeding of the five thousand took place near the time of Passover (6:4), when the Exodus 16 narrative was probably read in the synagogues. Understandably, their messianic expectations may have been heightened--thus their desire to make Jesus king on the spot (6:15). John also exploits the theme of the people's grumbling (6:41,43,61,66), alludes to the Adamic temptation (6:37 = Gen 3:24; 6:50 = Gen 2:17 and 3:3; 6:51 = Gen 3:22),²⁷ and reminds us of the significance of the Spirit's instruction (6:63; cf. also v 45, a quotation from Isa 54:13).

One of the great climactic elements in the Gospel of John comes in 19:34, where the evangelist--e alone among the Gospel writers--tells us that Jesus was struck with the soldier's spear so that blood and water came out from him. Much effort has been spent on the anatomical significance of this incident, but we may be sure that John was not at all motivated by medical questions. For him this was a matter of the greatest importance, as we may gather by the strong affirmation in the following verse (19:35). The allusion to Exodus 17 is too clear to be missed. The long-suffering YHWH, abundant in grace and truth, was suffering for his people, that they might receive the Spirit of salvation.²⁸

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood, From thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure, Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r.

²⁷ Cf. A. Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) 62.

²⁸ I first heard this approach from my teacher E. P. Clowney. For a recent and clear defense, see Gary M. Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 93-95, 133-35.

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