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The Gospel of John

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INTRODUCTION

"IN THE BEGINNING was the Word" (John 1:1). This introduction, like virtually every verse in the Gospel of John, has meant many things to many readers. An allusion to Genesis, a cosmic introduction to the gospel narrative, an indication of Hellenistic influence, a key to Sophia (Wisdom) Christology—these words are all these and more.¹ But to an aficionada of literary criticism, they point, above all, to the primacy of the written word and of the activity of reading, which gives life to the word.

This commentary, which will outline my own reading of the Fourth Gospel, will necessarily be partial, in two senses. First, it will be partial rather than comprehensive, a limitation imposed as much by the complexity of this Gospel and the vast amount of secondary literature as by the finite space and focused task of this particular contribution. Second, it will be partial rather than impartial, expressing my own interests in and outlook on the field and the text, as a participant in the scholarly endeavor, as a Jew, and as a feminist.

My reading of this Gospel has been influenced by the work of other scholars and by the historical-critical concerns that have generally occupied the field. What is the relationship between this Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels, attributed to Matthew, Mark, and Luke? How, why, when, and to whom was the Gospel of John written? I will expand on these and other historical-critical issues as they arise. The primary interest of this commentary, however, lies in the relationship between the text and the reader. This literary-critical focus stems both from my own innate proclivities and from a conviction that reading and readers are central to the concern of this Gospel. This is suggested not only by John 1:1 but also by the statement of purpose in 20:30–31. This passage addresses the readers directly, declaring that this Gospel was written "that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." According to this statement,

the purpose of the Gospel is rhetorical. It aims not simply to persuade the reader that its claims regarding Jesus are "true" but also, primarily, to inculcate in the reader the worldview expressed in this text. A principal concern of the commentary will therefore be to expose the means by which the Gospel attempts to achieve this goal.

My interests, while supported by a professional assessment concerning the centrality of literary concerns to this text, are focused more narrowly by my identity as a Jew and a feminist. As a Jewish reader, the word "Jew" leaps out at me at every turn; as a feminist reader, I note the characters, symbols, and rhetorical moves that might have shaped the reading of this Gospel by the women among its earliest audience. What this commentary represents, therefore, is my effort to bring these perspectives together in a way that will draw other readers into critical dialogue with this text and with the body of scholarship it has spawned.

Before beginning, however, some brief words about the background and composition of the Gospel are in order. Among the issues for which there is general, though not universal, agreement are the provenance, date, and authorship of the Gospel. Most scholars do not challenge the traditional location of the Gospel in Ephesus or some other large center in Asia Minor in which there would have been a sizable Jewish population. A late first century date for the Gospel is also generally accepted, on both external and internal grounds. The *terminus ad quem* (latest possible date) is generally thought to be 100–110 C.E. This judgment is based on the fact that our earliest fragment from this Gospel, P52, which is probably the earliest extant fragment of the Christian Testament, is dated roughly to 135. Its Egyptian provenance would imply a date of roughly 100 for the writing of the Gospel, on the assumption that it would have taken several decades for this text to reach Egypt.

The *terminus post quem* (earliest possible date) is generally thought to be about 85, on the assumption that 9:22 refers to an expulsion of Jewish-Christians from the synagogue often dated to that year. Those who question this reference, however, still generally hold to a late first century dating, on the assumption that a high Christology and realized eschatology are indicative of a fairly advanced development of theology in the early church.²

Although the Gospel claims that the Beloved Disciple is the authoritative witness behind the events recorded therein, many scholars now disregard the traditional identification of the Beloved Disciple with John son of Zebedee and consider the absolute identity of the author to be irretrievable. The relationship between John and the Synoptic Gospels and the historicity of the Fourth Gospel are also extremely problematic. It has been a general consensus that John is not an eye-witness source for the life of the historical Jesus and that the Fourth Gospel betrays no direct dependence on the Synoptic Gospels,

though it does share in a general tradition that is reflected in the other three. This consensus is being questioned, however, though I have not yet been convinced that it must be discarded.³ Similarly problematic is the process of composition that led to the Gospel in its present form. Was there a pre-Johannine signs source on which the author drew in the writing of this text? Are there certain pericopes that are transposed in the final version? Are the theological inconsistencies due to a redactional process? I would answer "maybe" to the first question and "probably not" to the other two.

Most vexing is the question of the historical circumstances that gave rise to this Gospel. Descriptions of Jewish practices, such as ritual handwashing (2:6), and of particular locations, such as Bethzatha (5:2), suggest a writer familiar with both Judaism and the geography of first-century Palestine, while specific phrases, such as the feast "of the Jews," imply an audience to whom Jewish institutions are not familiar. The use of the term *logos* in the prologue is highly suggestive of Hellenistic Jewish philosophy, particularly the work of Philo of Alexandria. Added to this mix are references to diverse religious and ethnic groups, a variety of christological titles and messianic expectations, and the sharp anti-Jewish polemics.

One way to account for this eclecticism is to reconstruct the Johannine community itself. This approach is based on the assumption that the Gospel emerged from, and was addressed to, a particular community. Some scholars, such as Raymond Brown, posit a fully developed community which may or may not have considered itself, or been considered by others, to be sectarian with respect to other Christian groups.⁴ The varied language can be accounted for on the basis of the varied backgrounds of those who joined the community at various stages. An ecclesiological reading supports the view that women may have had prominent roles as apostles and disciples within a community that did not draw distinctions along gender lines but rather on the basis of "correct" belief. It is also used to account for the anti-Jewish polemic on the grounds that the Johannine community faced expulsion from the synagogue, though one suspects that scholars may be misled by the usefulness of this theory for discounting the theological basis of Johannine anti-Judaism.

The Johannine community is also drawn into the debate over Johannine theology. Did this community practice the sacraments, as the ample references to living water and the Bread of Life discourse would imply? Or did it not do so, as the absence of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper might suggest? Did the community hold to a realized eschatology, which some later redactor softened by adding references to future eschatology? Or was there a reverse process at work, in which future eschatology was characteristic of the first members of the community, while later adherents held to a realized eschatology? The jury is still out on these questions.

came from God, and who have believed that God sent him (17:8). For these, Jesus asks God's protection from the evil one (17:15), presumably Satan, and his sanctification in the truth (17:17).

Explicitly included in this group are not only the disciples as characters within the narrative but later generations of believers, "those who will believe in me through their word" (17:20), that is, the preaching of the disciples. With this explicit statement, the Johannine Jesus overcomes the chronological limits of the Gospel story and includes in his petition all readers who assent to the christological and other claims of the Gospel. Jesus prays that they "may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (17:24).

By conveying the words of the Johannine Jesus to his disciples on the eve of his death, the farewell discourses are a powerful rhetorical vehicle for the Gospel message. On the historical level, Jesus bids farewell to his disciples and encourages them to view his departure in a positive light. Read ecclesiologically, this section offers consolation and hope for the Johannine community in the face of persecution. On a cosmological level, all readers are invited not only to see themselves as being addressed by Jesus' words but also to place themselves into the story of the Word, who is departing from the world and returning to the Father to prepare a place for them.

Throughout these discourses, the Jews hover in the background, their presence intimated in the references to the present suffering of Jesus and the future persecution of the disciples. They return to center stage in the following section, the climax of the Gospel story.

THE PASSION NARRATIVE

The Betrayal, Trials, and Crucifixion (18:1–19:42)

The Johannine passion narrative raises many questions. While its basic structure—betrayal, trials, crucifixion, burial, resurrection appearances—is similar to that in the Synoptic accounts, there are significant differences in content, chronology, and Christology. For example, the Johannine account does not relate the agony in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42 and parallels); the Synoptic Gospels do not portray Jesus as giving his mother into the care of one of his disciples at the foot of the cross. The Synoptic passion accounts place Jesus' crucifixion on the Passover itself; the Johannine account has Jesus tried, crucified, and buried before the Passover festival begins. Whereas the Synoptic Jesus cries out to his Father on the cross (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46; Luke 23:46), his Johannine counterpart simply says, "It is finished" (19:30).

Pervading many discussions of the passion narrative is the question of historicity. This question is not simply an academic one, not the least because of

the charge of deicide in the history of Christian anti-Semitism.⁴⁶ Our discussion, however, will limit its focus to the rhetoric with respect to the Jews (an issue separate from their historical role in the trial and death of Jesus), to Jesus, and to the women characters in this final section.

The reader's image of the Jews is determined in the Passion primarily by the behavior attributed to them and by their interactions with Jesus and Pilate. Judas betrays Jesus not to the Roman governor or troops but to the police of the chief priests and Pharisees. These latter may be identified with the Temple police involved in the unsuccessful attempt to arrest Jesus in 7:32, 45. The fact that they come to arrest him demonstrates that now—in contrast to the earlier feast of Tabernacles—Jesus' time has finally come.

The police take Jesus to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest (18:13). The narrator at this point reminds us of Caiaphas's advice "that it was better to have one person die for the people" (18:14; cf. 11:49–50), advice that is interpreted as prophetic (11:51–53). This reminder reinforces the theme of the farewell discourses: the events now taking place, unhappy as they are by ordinary human judgment, are in fulfillment of prophecy and the divine plan for salvation.

In contrast to its earlier loquaciousness, the Gospel provides only a brief account of Jesus' interview with Annas (18:19–22) and none at all of his subsequent interview with Caiaphas, the high priest himself. Indeed, a primary focus during these scenes is on what takes place outside: the threefold denial of Simon Peter, who is not permitted to witness the proceedings, is contrasted with the devotion of the Beloved Disciple, allowed in because of his priestly connections (18:16). This silence fosters the sense that there is in fact no more to be said; the views of both parties have been made abundantly clear in their previous encounters as related in this Gospel. The delivering of Jesus to Pilate is in itself merely a confirmation of the Jews' verdict that was reached long before this point in the story.

Conversely, the remainder of the section describes a complex narrative in which Pilate is in dialogue alternately with Jesus and the Jews. The scene begins with Pilate's attempt to ascertain Jesus' crime and to persuade the Jews to deal with the matter themselves. The Jews do not reveal his crime directly, but merely assert his criminal status (18:30) and imply the seriousness of his crime by reminding Pilate that "we are not permitted to put anyone to death" (18:31).⁴⁷ This opening establishes Pilate as a puzzled and reluctant participant in the proceedings against Jesus.

Pilate then goes inside to speak with Jesus. He begins by asking him directly, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (18:33). Jesus' response emphasizes his spiritual kingship in a way that appears to satisfy Pilate's concerns that Jesus is a political threat. Pilate returns outside to inform the Jews that "I find no case against him" (18:38) and to offer a solution: that he appeal to his usual custom

of releasing someone at the Passover, and set Jesus free. At this the Jews clamor: "Not this man, but Barabbas!" (18:40).

This seems to settle the matter, as Jesus is flogged, mocked as king of the Jews, and stricken by Pilate's soldiers. But Pilate then brings Jesus out to the Jews, to "let you know that I find no case against him" (19:4). When the chief priests and police call for his crucifixion, Pilate again wants to put the matter back in their hands, because, as he reiterates, he finds no case against Jesus (19:6). To this the Jews answer that he ought to die for claiming to be the Son of God (19:7).

At this point, according to the narrator, Pilate was more afraid than ever (19:8) and returned to question Jesus about his origins. Jesus refuses to answer, but when Pilate reminds him of his own power to release or to crucify him, Jesus responds: "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (19:11). Pilate is thereby absolved of the moral responsibility, and the Jews blamed. Pilate's innocence in the matter and his fear of the Jews are confirmed by the final scene, in which the Jews again override his attempts to release Jesus by clamoring for his crucifixion (19:15-16).

The rhetorical agenda is obvious. The freedom of the narrator in this section is limited by two facts: that Jesus was crucified and that crucifixion was a Roman form of execution. The crucifixion has already been accounted for in the farewell discourses, in which Jesus situates the cross positively in the cosmological context of the Gospel. The second limitation is overcome by portraying the Roman governor technically responsible for condemning Jesus, as innocent, fearful of the Jewish authorities, and manipulated by them into issuing the order despite his sincere misgivings.

The question that arises, however, is by now familiar. Does the Gospel distinguish between the Jewish authorities and other Jews, or does it blame the Jewish people as a whole? In favor of the former opinion one may cite the periodic references to the chief priests and Pharisees; although the term "Jews" is used frequently, one may argue that the immediate referent is the authorities. But there are strong arguments against this opinion. First, the fact that the term "Jews" is used blurs the distinction between the Jews and their leaders for readers of or listeners to this section, as in earlier chapters. Second, Pilate himself explicitly places responsibility on the Jews as a whole. When Jesus asks him how he heard of the claim that Jesus was the king of the Jews, Pilate responds: "*Your own nation* and the chief priests have handed you over to me . . ." (18:35; emphasis added). This claim echoes the prologue in referring to the rejection of the Word by his own people. Third, the title "King of the Jews," though apparently part of the traditional material drawn upon by all the Gospels (cf. Mark 15:26; Matt 27:37; Luke 23:37), is used here ironically. Jesus is not the king of Jews; the Jews have rejected him (18:36). He is, however, the

king of Israel; that is, he is acknowledged as king by true Israelites like Nathanael, who recognize his true identity as the Son of God (cf. 1:49). Finally, there is an ironic element to the betrayal scene. To a reader who has read the Gospel sequentially, this scene is an ironic perversion of the conversion stories such as the call of the disciples (1:35–51) and the apostolic witness of the Samaritan woman (4:1–42). When the police arrive, led by Judas, Jesus greets them with a question: “Whom are you looking for?” (18:4). This is virtually the same question Jesus asked of the two disciples of John the Baptist who became his first two followers (1:38). Here, however, the meaning is quite different; those who look for him do not seek to follow him as the Messiah but to annihilate him for claiming to be such. Their answer, “Jesus of Nazareth,” is met with the now-familiar formula: “I am (*egō eimi*).” Having heard Jesus use this phrase in acknowledging his messianic identity to the Samaritan woman, and in conjunction with various nonpersonal predicates such as “resurrection and the life” (11:25), the reader knows how inadequate the term “Jesus of Nazareth” is as a statement of his true identity. Yet Jesus assents to it here, apparently having given up, as he has stated at the close of chapter 12, on the possibility of saving his persecutors.

Just as these concluding chapters maintain the Gospel’s negative portrayal of the Jews, so do they continue its positive portrayal of female characters. As in the other Gospels, it is women who are mentioned specifically as being present at the foot of the cross (19:25) though the context later makes it clear that the Beloved Disciple is present as well. While most commentators assert that these women—Jesus’ mother, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene—are disciples, apostles, or at least believers, this is made explicit only in the case of Mary Magdalene (20:1–18).

Even more puzzling is the significance of the ensuing scene (19:26–27) in which Jesus gives his mother and his Beloved Disciple into one another’s care. On the human level, this may simply be a practical expression of his filial duty, his attempt to provide for her as best he could. Perhaps he is concerned for the emotional well-being of these two people; Jesus’ coming departure is depriving his mother of her son, and the disciple of his intimate mentor; what better consolation for each of them than to sojourn together? Scholars have generally not been satisfied with such explanations; given the highly symbolic nature of much of Johannine narrative and discourse, a symbolic, theological interpretation seems to be called for in this case as well. The difficulties in arriving at a satisfying interpretation—and the wide variety of suggested exegeses—are due to the paucity of evidence. Most theories, from Bultmann’s argument that the scene portrays Jewish Christianity (the mother) being contained within Gentile Christianity (the Beloved Disciple), to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s suggestion that the mother is an apostolic woman disciple, read the passage as a reference to the Johannine community.⁴⁸

A clue to the meaning of the passage may lie in a comparison between these two characters. Both are anonymous and intimately related to Jesus. But the mother of Jesus is an elusive figure about whom we know almost nothing; as far as we know, she is absent from all but two scenes in the narrative, and her faith status is unclear. The Beloved Disciple, on the other hand, is much more clearly drawn, despite the fact that he does not appear until chapter 13. He has a close relationship with Jesus and is the mediator through whom questions to Jesus are often asked. He is present at Jesus' trial before the priests, as well as at the foot of the cross. Where she is the one who literally embodied the divine word, he is the one who embodies the love commandment that Jesus has given so emphatically to his disciples. Finally, the emphasis throughout the Gospel on the language of dwelling is suggestive. The mother will now dwell with her new son, just as Jesus dwelt among humankind, just as the Paraclete will dwell among the disciples. The bringing together of this mother, through whom the Word became flesh, and her new son, whose witness to the Word in the World is embodied in this book (cf. 19:35; 21:24) is a fitting finale for this Gospel of the Word.

The Resurrection Appearances (20:1–31)

References to female characters are absent from 13:1–19:24. In contrast, chapter 20 lingers over Mary Magdalene's discovery of the empty tomb and the aftermath of this discovery. Coming to weep at the tomb on the morning of the third day, Mary sees that the stone has been removed, and she immediately reports this to Simon Peter and the other disciple (presumably the Beloved Disciple). The men return home after inspecting the tomb for themselves; Mary, however, stays to weep. To her surprise, she sees two angels and then Jesus himself. He addresses her as he did his mother in 2:4 and 19:26, as "woman." In asking her whom she seeks, he again (as in 18:4) recalls the words with which he gathered his first two disciples in chapter 1. Mistaking him for the gardener, she asks for Jesus' body. Jesus then calls her by name, and she recognizes him. This response marks her as one of Jesus' sheep, who hear his voice and follow him (10:1–5) and as a believer like Lazarus, who heard his voice and was resurrected from the dead (11:44). Jesus asks her not to hold him or touch him (20:17), because he has not yet ascended; instead, he wishes her to report his appearance and imminent ascension to his brothers, presumably the other disciples. She carries out his wishes, though the response of the disciples is not recorded.

Mary Magdalene is therefore portrayed as an apostle, as the first one to know and understand the full significance of the empty tomb and to bear witness to others. In this context the silence of the text regarding the disciples' response is puzzling. Did they or did they not believe her witness? That they

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did is implied in the way in which they greet the risen Lord when he appears to them that evening. This appearance is not said to occasion belief but rather rejoicing, as indeed it should according to the farewell discourses.

The evening appearance, therefore, serves to further their faith and also to provide them with the Holy Spirit. But Thomas, absent on that occasion, refuses to believe the witness of the disciples; he wants to see and touch the mark of the nails before believing. Jesus returns and invites Thomas to do so, though whether Thomas touches Jesus is not told. Thomas makes a high confession "My Lord and my God" but receives a gentle rebuke: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29). This, like Jesus' prayer in chapter 17, is an appeal to the readers, who live at a time when direct vision is not possible. It also anticipates the next two verses, the Gospel's statement of purpose, which establishes the Gospel itself as a basis of faith for those who cannot see. The disciples too had an opportunity to believe without seeing, as did the nobleman in chapter 4 and Martha in chapter 11, through the witness of Mary Magdalene.

Epilogue (21:1-25)

The compositional relationship of this final chapter to the rest of this chapter is unclear. The risen Lord appears to the disciples while they are fishing in the Sea of Tiberias. While the Beloved Disciple is privileged, as the one who is the first to recognize the Lord on this occasion, it is Simon Peter who is told by Jesus to feed and tend his lambs, that is, to care for the community of believers. This detail lends some credence to those who see the epilogue as an attempt to bring the Gospel in line with the general picture of Peter as the leader of the earliest post-Easter community. This shift does not, however, undermine the position of the Beloved Disciple as the authoritative witness behind the Gospel, who "is testifying to these things and has written them" (21:24), though he may have died before the Gospel took its present form (21:20-23).

The strong guidelines given in the farewell discourses for interpreting the events of the passion narrative are essential to the rhetorical agenda of this Gospel. The passion events in themselves might be subject to very different reading without such strong guidance. The possibility of a different response is illustrated by Mary, whose initial interpretation of the empty tomb is to assume that someone (Jesus' enemies? the gardener?) has taken the Lord. The fact of Jesus' death might have been taken to invalidate all of the christological claims of the Gospel. This possibility is voiced by the Jews in 12:34: "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up?" The Gospel counters such objections by