



# **‘Lord, if you had been here ...’ (John 11.21): The Absence of Jesus and Strategies of Consolation in the Fourth Gospel**

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## **Abstract**

This article aims to account for two aspects of the Lazarus story: first, the words with which Martha and Mary greet Jesus on his arrival at Bethany and, second, Jesus' earlier unexplained delay on learning of Lazarus's illness. It is claimed that the absence of Jesus was of crucial concern to John's readership, whose cohesion was threatened by persecution and whose faith in Jesus' return at the eschaton was growing increasingly fragile. In response, John provides consolation for his flock by means of a twofold strategy: first, he deals with Jesus' absence by presenting the Holy Spirit advantageously as the abiding presence of Jesus in their midst and, second, he strengthens their resolve in the face of death by his emphasis on resurrection to life on Judgment Day as a present guarantee for those who believe in Jesus. Since these are distinctive aspects of John's presentation, the question is raised as to whether other characteristic features of his work, even perhaps his choice of the gospel medium, could plausibly be seen as part of the same process of meeting his readers' needs. The focus thus returns to the Lazarus story, distinctively placed as the centrepiece of the Gospel, and to a possible explanation of those aspects of it with which the study began. Two brief examples from the Gospel's reception history are offered by way of conclusion.

## **Keywords**

Lazarus, consolation, Spirit, disciples, eschatology, gospel medium

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## Introduction

‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died’ are the words with which Martha greets Jesus on the Bethany road in Jn 11.21. Whether we are intended to detect some note of reproach here is not clear.<sup>1</sup> What is abundantly clear, however, both from these words and from the circumstances in which they are uttered, is that Martha is suffering the grief and pain of bereavement. We may add to that the point that she and Mary had notified Jesus about Lazarus’s illness while their brother was still alive (11.3), which bespeaks a painful backdrop to Martha’s words here of time spent in anguished waiting for Jesus to come. But Martha’s Lord had not come; Lazarus had died, and Jesus had been absent.

As Martha’s encounter with Jesus proceeds, the tone becomes increasingly positive. She affirms her belief that God grants Jesus’ requests (v. 22),<sup>2</sup> and the dialogue which ensues culminates in Jesus’ magisterial statement ‘I am the resurrection and the life’, which, with its implications for all who believe, forms the pedagogical key to the miracle that is to come (vv. 25-26). Even so, we are not yet done with Martha’s initial pain-filled words, for they reappear on the lips of her sister later in v. 32. The fact of this repetition, voiced as it is by Mary—who is otherwise the silent sister in both Luke and John (cf. Lk. 10.38-42)—and made the more memorable by her grief-stricken behaviour (vv. 32-33), suggests that the issue of Jesus’ absence in circumstances such as these is intended to make its mark on the reader.

So much for the sisters’ perception of events upon Jesus’ arrival at Bethany. However, this is augmented significantly by what John has already told his readers before this point. In 11.6, he has specifically informed them that when Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill he remained two days longer in the place where he was. It is noticeable that John supplies no explanation for this curious delay; no objection by Jesus, for example about his ‘hour’ or his ‘time’ not yet having come, that we find in other instances of negative response earlier in the Gospel (2.4; 7.6; cf. 4.48).<sup>3</sup> Instead, we have an assurance in the previous verse of Jesus’ love not only for Lazarus, but for the entire Bethany family, an aside that looks designed to ward off any impression on the reader’s part that Jesus’ inaction was out of indifference (North 2001:137). What John’s readers know in advance, therefore, which

1. A.T. Lincoln, for example, comments on the ‘overtone of complaint’ about Jesus’ delay in Martha’s words but also on her faith in his healing powers; see Lincoln 2005: 323.
2. This looks like an application to Jesus of the familiar ‘ask, and it will be given you’ logion (see, e.g., Mt.7.7-8/Lk.11.9-10; Jn 16.23-24; 1 Jn 5.13-16) and anticipates the confident form of Jesus’ prayer in 11.41-42; see North 2001: 106-17.
3. *Pace* Gblm 1980: 219, Jesus’ announcement in 11.4 is not part of the negative response, but declares John’s special interests for the benefit of the reader. Jesus’ actual response to the sisters’ news is not recorded until 11.6 (note John’s resumptive οὖν at the beginning of the verse, as he takes up the story-line from v. 3).

significantly augments the sisters' perception of events at Bethany, is that Jesus had not only been absent when Lazarus died (cf. 11.14), but that, for some unspecified reason, he had deliberately remained where he was.

In the light of these observations, this study will attempt to account for the following aspects of the Lazarus story: first, John's concern to impress the sisters' plight on the minds of his readers and, second, the unexplained delay—painstakingly glossed by John—before Jesus sets out for Bethany. As I proceed, my investigation will broaden in scope and I will discuss not only the Lazarus story as a whole, but also its position in the Gospel and the Gospel's overall shape, before I return to the two points of detail I have highlighted here. I will begin, however, by exploring the implications of the absence of Jesus for John's first readers.

### **Jesus' Absence and the Pressure of Persecution**

In a very real sense, the absence of Jesus is the situation that informs the Gospel at every turn. The story of Jesus that John relates to his readers belongs to the past as far as they are concerned, and hence their access to the events of Jesus' life is inevitably at second hand. If the past is blocked off, the future by contrast is brimming with promise, for the Day of Judgment will surely come when Jesus will return and raise the faithful to eternal life.<sup>4</sup> For John and his readers, however, that glorious day has yet to dawn. In the meantime, they are betwixt and between; denied a part in the past, they live in hope of the future—and Jesus remains absent.

The situation John faces here is more than simply the delay of the parousia; rather, it is the fact that there are circumstances in play capable of testing that hope to destruction. The major destabilizing factor in this case, it seems, is persecution.<sup>5</sup> This brings us to the vexed question of the life-situation of the Gospel; vexed not only because of the lake of academic ink expended on it, but also because, by its very nature, a sophisticated text like John's, crafted to deal with a situation rather than replicate it, is unlikely to offer up pristine fact at the best of times.<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to say that, broadly speaking, the Gospel shows strong signs of a painful rift having taken place between John's group and the Jewish community known to that group. More specifically, the evidence from those areas where the dispute between Jesus and 'the Jews' is at its most rancorous suggests that the flashpoint is the Johannine Christology and that the charge of blasphemy, which

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4. As Jörg Frey has successfully shown, the hope of Jesus' return at the eschaton was alive and well in Johannine circles; see Frey 2005: 57–65.

5. Frey, for example, pictures the community struggling with persecution, aware of the absence of Jesus and in growing doubt over the promise of the parousia (2005: 68–69).

6. On these points, see North 2010: 209, 220 and further bibliography there.

issue John tackles not once but twice (5.18; 10.33), has been brought against those for whom he writes.

At this point, it will be helpful to turn our attention to the strongly worded 16.2,<sup>7</sup> in which John presents Jesus looking ahead beyond his lifetime to the fate of his followers. In 16.2b, following a third reference to exclusion from the synagogue, Jesus points to a time to come when killing believers will be seen as an act of service to God: 'An hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God' (NRSV) (ἐρχεται ὥρα ἵνα πᾶς ὁ ἀποκτείνας ὑμᾶς δόξῃ λατρεῖαν προσφέρειν τῷ θεῷ). Two features about this statement persuade me that the situation being described here is closer to reality than it is to rhetoric. The first is John's use of the phrase λατρεῖαν προσφέρειν, 'to offer service'. This is a hapax legomenon in the Gospel, which could suggest that John has a specific circumstance in mind that he has been disinclined to gloss.<sup>8</sup> The second feature relates to the subject matter of the discourse leading up to this particular verse. From 15.18 onwards, John has laboured the point that to be hated and persecuted by the world is to follow faithfully in Jesus' footsteps and to bear witness to him. This is the stuff of martyrdom; *imitatio Christi* in this case involves a willingness to lay down one's life.<sup>9</sup> In 16.1, the reason for this teaching is stated, namely, to prevent the disciples from 'falling away' (ἵνα μὴ σκανδαλισθῇτε),<sup>10</sup> and it is only at this point, when he is satisfied that the case for remaining faithful in adversity has been conclusively made, that John has Jesus predict that those who will exclude them from the synagogues will also seek their lives (cf. 16.4). Thus, it is not only the content of 16.2, but also the lengths to which John has gone to provide context to cushion the blow that suggest that this description has a basis in reality.

If this is so, then surely under such circumstances the hope of the parousia will have burned with a peculiar intensity. Rejected and threatened with death by the community which is their natural home, John's group will have looked to their allegiance to Jesus and, specifically, to the cherished promise of his coming in judgment for deliverance from such extremity. Thus, while the situation John faces here may focus on the delay of the parousia, this issue has been lent urgency by adverse circumstances. Already perhaps a cause of unease, it now

7. Rightly in my view, Barnabas Lindars identifies chs. 15–17 as part of the latest stratum of the Gospel, supplementary material for which John himself was also responsible; see Lindars 1972: 50–51, 467–68.

8. See North 2001: 48 with n. 11.

9. So already, in fact, in Jn 15.12–13. The evangelist's literal application of the injunction to lay down one's life in imitation of Jesus is thrown into relief by the treatment of the same material in 1 Jn 3.16–18, where martyrdom is not envisaged. In the epistle, to lay down one's life (ψυχὴ) is taken metaphorically to mean to lay down one's 'means of life' (βίος), or worldly goods.

10. A reference to apostasy, cf. 6.61; see Lincoln 2005: 412–13.

sits at the heart of the matter, for persecution has lent such fervour to the hope for Jesus' return, so much hangs upon it, that there is a very real danger that Jesus' continued absence will cause a 'falling away' on a scale that will threaten the integrity of John's group. The prayer in Jn 17, for example, peppered as it is with the call for unity and including reference to second-generation believers (17.20-21), may well reflect the fact that such disaffection was already a reality at the time of writing.<sup>11</sup>

How, then, is John to ensure the survival of his group beyond this crisis? How does he deal with Jesus' absence in their lives and at the same time stiffen the sinews and chart a course for the future? What he cannot do, of course, is hasten the eschaton. Indeed, according to Mark, not even Jesus can do that, for that day or that hour is known only to God (Mk 13.32; cf. Acts 1.7). In what ways, then, does John seek to bring reassurance and hope to his beleaguered flock? Put simply, his strategy is twofold and its keynote is consolation: consolation on the one hand for the absence of Jesus by presenting the Spirit as Jesus' presence in their midst and advantageously so, and consolation on the other for the looming threat of death by presenting resurrection to life on Judgment Day as a guarantee *now* for those with faith in Jesus. Let us explore these two aspects of John's strategy in greater detail.

## John's Consolatory Strategy

### 1. Jesus Now

*The Spirit-Paraclete.* One of the most extraordinary features of this Gospel is John's presentation of the Holy Spirit as Jesus' *Doppelgänger*. While references to the Spirit are by no means lacking in the earlier part of the Gospel, it is quite clear that John has reserved his most detailed and distinctive treatment of the Spirit's role for the final discourse material. Thus, in keeping with the Synoptics, he refers to the Spirit's descent at Jesus' baptism (1.32-33) and, in following chapters, he goes on to stress the need for believers to be born of the Spirit and to worship in Spirit and truth (3.5; 4.24). By 7.39, however, he is already warning to his theme that the benefits bestowed by the Spirit will become available when Jesus departs, and this promise is later made good in ch. 20 when, contrary to the timing in Luke-Acts (Lk. 24.49; Acts 2.4), Jesus bestows the Spirit on the disciples on his first post-resurrection meeting with them (20.22).

It is not until the final discourse material, however, that John applies the term *παράκλητος* to the Spirit. The first instance of this, in 14.17, sets the tone. Here Jesus refers to the Spirit as 'another Paraclete' who will remain with the disciples when he is gone. Thus, in the words of Raymond Brown, 'the Paraclete is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent' (Brown 1971: 1141). In further 'Paraclete'

11. See, for example, Lindars 1972: 516.

passages, John continues to link the two figures in tandem. Thus, just as Jesus was 'the Truth', so the Paraclete is the 'Spirit of Truth' (14.6; cf. 14.17; 15.26; 16.13), and just as the world could not accept Jesus, so it cannot accept the Paraclete (15.18; cf. 14.17). Further similarities with Jesus include descriptions of the Paraclete as one who is sent, as one who witnesses, who speaks only what he hears, and who declares the things to come (cf. 3.17 and 14.26; 15.26; 16.7; cf. 18.37 and 15.26; cf. 8.28 and 16.13; cf. 16.4 and 16.13).<sup>12</sup> In sum, John's readers can scarcely have failed to find here the reassurance that Jesus had not left his followers 'orphaned', as he puts it in 14.18, but was ever present to them in the person of the Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

*'To your Advantage'.* A further facet of John's consolation of his flock with regard to their possession of the Spirit is to convey to them that this places them at an advantage over those who were with Jesus at the time. To the point here is the Spirit's function as interpreter of Jesus' words and deeds; to the point also is the lack of this resource in the case of the first disciples before Jesus' glorification, a factor that significantly affects John's treatment of them in the course of the Gospel narrative.

In the final discourse material, the Spirit is presented as reminding and teaching the disciples about Jesus' words and guiding them into all the truth, expounding to them the revelation of God that took place in Jesus (14.26; 16.12-15). In this exegetical role, we learn, the Spirit will bring no new revelation but will continue to point back to the significance of Jesus' life and work; it is Jesus himself who has more to say (16.12) and it is into his truth that the interpreter-Spirit is to guide the disciples.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in Jesus' own words, 'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you' (16.7).

Without that advantage, the disciples in the Gospel narrative generally fare badly when it comes to understanding Jesus. John, meanwhile, is at pains to point out that a proper grasp of the significance of events was not available until after Jesus' death and resurrection, when memory and understanding would go hand in hand (2.22; 7.39; 12.16). Consequently, the disciples join the ranks of the baffled in taking Jesus' words literally (4.31-34; 11.11-14; cf. Nicodemus in 3.4), and their incomprehension functions as a foil to his teaching (10.6; 14.5-11, 22; 16.16-20). Peter, in particular, reprises his Markan role both in his enthusiasm to follow Jesus when he cannot and in his denials of Jesus despite vows to the

12. See further the evidence in Brown 1971: 1140-41.

13. Further on the theme of consolation in the final discourses, see Parsenios 2005. Parsenios refers to 'the overarching concern of the discourses to render Jesus present in his absence, to bring future generations into the presence of their Lord' (154). See also Holloway 2005-2006: 1-33.

14. As C.K. Barrett comments, 'There is no independent revelation through the Paraclete, but only an application of the revelation in Jesus' (1978: 467).

contrary (13.36-38; 18.17-18, 25-27; cf. Mk 14.29-31, 66-72). In fact, according to John, he even exceeds his Markan brief in his readiness to wield the sword at Jesus' arrest (18.10-11; cf. Mk 14.47).

It is particularly remarkable that even in ch. 20, the setting where Jesus' first followers encounter their risen Lord, John continues to point up the inadequacy of their status. In the case of Mary Magdalene, for example, in the moving scene where she first mistakes Jesus for the gardener (20.11-17), John's message to the reader consists in how she reacts on recognizing him. Holding on to Jesus is a failure to understand a necessary process; Jesus cannot be detained on earth, for the Paraclete's exegetical guidance will not become possible unless Jesus ascends to the Father (v. 17). When it comes to Thomas, however, John is prepared to tread a good deal less delicately. Already, in his previous appearances in the Gospel, Thomas has shown a thorough lack of grasp, both of Jesus' actions in 11.16<sup>15</sup> and especially in 14.5 of the meaning of Jesus' words. This last example is essential background to the scene in ch. 20, where Thomas, who has not yet seen the risen Jesus, refuses to believe unless he is able to handle the evidence (vv. 24-25). Upon doing so, Thomas exclaims, 'My Lord and my God' (v. 28), famous words that are frequently taken as the climactic Christological confession of the Gospel.<sup>16</sup> This may be so, yet there is more here for John's readers when this declaration is taken in context. What Thomas has finally tumbled to, in fact, connects with what Jesus has said in 14.7, namely, that to know and see Jesus is to know and see the Father. Even more to the point here, however, is that Thomas's confession is not the goal of John's argument. This comes in the words of v. 29, in which Jesus contrasts Thomas, who has needed physical contact with the risen Lord before coming to faith, with those who are blessed, to whom that experience is not available and who yet believe (v. 29). Thus, even in the scenes following the resurrection, John's message is the same: just to have 'been there' and to have witnessed the events at first hand does not constitute an advantage; those who are blessed are subsequent generations of believers, who have access to authentic faith through the exegetical guidance of the Paraclete.<sup>17</sup>

15. See North 2001: 56-57.

16. See, for example, Lincoln 2005: 503; also Van Belle 2005: 442, 454, 457 and van der Watt 2005: 479 and n. 67.

17. As John Ashton remarks, the purpose of this beatitude is to show how mistaken John's readers would be to think of Jesus' contemporaries 'as somehow privileged over against themselves' (2007: 364). The single exception to this rule, of course, is the so-called Beloved Disciple, who never gets it wrong. Whatever may be the history behind this figure, he seems to be portrayed by John as another Jesus *Doppelgänger*, who remained after Jesus was gone. In his first appearance in 13.23, he rests in Jesus' lap just as Jesus rests in the Father's lap in 1.18; in 18.15 he enters with Jesus into the οὐλή (a term that does double duty both for the courtyard of the High Priest and also for the fold of the sheep in 10.1-3), which Jesus the Good Shepherd enters; and in 19.26-27 he takes Jesus' place in the family as Mary's son.

## 2. Judgment Now

The second aspect of John's consolatory message to his readers is to affirm that the conditions of Judgment Day are already in force, thus turning the hope of eternal life in the future into a present reality for those who believe in Jesus. The key text here is 3.16-21, in which John turns aside from his narrative to set out his understanding of the impact of Jesus' life in the cosmic setting of God's dealings with the world he created and wishes to save. Put briefly, John's argument is as follows. God sent his Son into the world as a salvific act of love with the offer of eternal life for all through belief in Jesus (v. 16). Nevertheless, the inevitable consequence of Jesus' revelation of God in the world is judgment, and this comes about because of human response to the shedding of that light. Thus, those who believe, who do the truth and come to the light, are saved while those who shun the light because of their evil deeds 'already stand condemned' (ἤδη κέ κριταί) as John puts it chillingly in v. 18 (cf. vv. 19-21 and the summary in 3.36).

In other words, John has been able to take the scenario conventionally associated with the eschaton and bring it to bear on the here and now. He has done that on the understanding that in the person of Jesus the future judge is present (so Lindars 1972: 224) and by doing that he has caused the whole judging process to hinge on acceptance or rejection of Jesus. There is much in John's presentation of Jesus' ministry that resonates with this eschatological shift. Note, for example, that 'the Jews' who oppose Jesus in ch. 8 are already condemned as the devil's kind (8.37-59). Note, similarly, the condemnation in ch. 9 of the Pharisees, who wilfully reject Jesus as the light of the world (8.12; 9.5, 35-41; cf. 15.22, 24). Judas Iscariot also merits John's eschatological treatment, not only as Satan's creature (6.70-71; 13.2, 30), but also as 'the son of perdition' (ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας, 17.12), the phrase used by Paul in 2 Thess. 2.3 of the instigator of the final apostasy before the parousia (cf. 2 Thess. 2.3-12). Note, finally, that in Jn 12 the overthrow of these Satanic powers is accomplished at the *crucifixion*, when this world is judged and its ruler cast out (12.31; cf. 16.33).<sup>18</sup>

## Preliminary Conclusion and Comment

For those second-generation disciples for whom he writes, John has provided comfortable words indeed. What he has done, in fact, is turn their whole situation around; loss of the past has become gain in the present, and hope for the future is now present certainty. I have proposed that this has been achieved by a twofold strategy: on the one hand, by John's presentation of the Spirit-Paraclete as Jesus' continuing presence in their midst, whose function to guide them and foster

18. On the impact of the heavenly Son of Man figure on John's Christology and his perception of Jesus' death, see Ashton 2011: 508-29 (526).

growth in understanding places them at an advantage over the first disciples and, on the other, by his eschatology which, with its emphasis on judgment in the present, confirms that those who oppose them, who may look powerful and threatening now, are already condemned in God's sight because they have wilfully rejected Jesus. Thus, to belong to the group that John represents remains the only and ultimate decision to make. With the advantages conveyed by the Spirit-Paraclete, they are possessed of the means to go forward and expound the meaning of Jesus for a new day. Moreover, should their lives be forfeit, they know that eternal life is theirs already and that resurrection to life by Jesus awaits them at the eschaton.

This last point, on present assurance of future destiny, could bear some further comment. It would, I believe, be a serious misjudgment of John's position to argue on the basis of his emphasis on the present that he has all but set aside the conventional future expectation of the eschaton.<sup>19</sup> As regards Gospel evidence, John makes direct mention of the eschaton not only in the form of repeated references to 'the last day' in chs. 6, 11 and 12 (6.39, 40, 44, 54; cf. 11.24; 12.48), but also, and spectacularly, in 5.28-29, where he supplies the full Daniel-inspired apocalyptic picture with Jesus, Son of man (v. 27), calling the dead from their tombs to resurrection to life or to judgment, a description not unworthy of the author of Revelation. The relative infrequency of these references, however, is *not* a measure of John's estimate of the importance of the event; rather, it is an indicator that this is tradition he shares with his readers, which he takes as a given and sees no need to press further. In fact, it is one of several examples in the Gospel that illustrate John's tendency to rely on his readers' knowledge of tradition (cf. 3.24; 6.70; 20.30-31). I would argue that John's emphasis on the present is best expressed by Barnabas Lindars's phrase 'anticipated eschatology' (1972: 224), that is, John continues to hold to the conventional future expectation of the eschaton but, in response to the needs of the moment, he focuses on the case for the conditions of Judgment Day now.<sup>20</sup> As an example of this capacity to hold together both present and future aspects, it is well worth observing that, while John has Jesus declare in ch. 12 that the ruler of this world is cast out at the crucifixion (12.31-33), as we have seen, in ch. 17 he has Jesus pray that his followers, who remain in the world when he is gone, may be kept from the evil one (17.15). Satan may have been judged—and in that regard the crucifixion is decisive—but John is keenly aware that until the eschaton, when sentence is carried out, he remains dangerous.<sup>21</sup>

19. In agreement with Frey 2005: 81.

20. This itself is not without precedent in the tradition; see Ashton 2007: 409; Lincoln 2000: 213-14; North 2001: 81 n. 62. Indeed, there can scarcely be anything more 'realized' than Jesus' response in Lk. 23.43 to the penitent thief on the cross: 'Today you will be with me in paradise'.

21. L.T. Stuckenbruck (2011) ably demonstrates that the petition in Jn 17.15 was a familiar one in Second Temple Jewish texts and was based on the certainty that, although evil continues to hold sway, its days are numbered and its destruction awaits.

## Broadening the Scope

Up to this point, we have examined what I have described as a twofold strategy pursued by John in answer to the immediate needs of his readership. Thus, in the absence of Jesus, he has consoled them with the assurance that their Lord is present in their midst in the form of the Spirit-Paraclete and has underscored the advantage of their situation; also, in the lapse of time before the eschaton, he has consoled them with the assurance that their faith in Jesus, who is present and future judge, means that resurrection to life by him at the last day is guaranteed.

In the process of this investigation, I have appealed to material that is distinctive to the Fourth Gospel by contrast with the Synoptics. I have begun to wonder whether there is more that is distinctively Johannine that could plausibly be drawn in here, rather than such differences being attributed, as is often suggested, to John's reliance on non-Synoptic tradition.<sup>22</sup> This, in turn, prompts me briefly to consider a much broader question that is not often posed, which is, 'Why did John produce a Gospel?' Why not a dogmatic treatise, or some other similar distillation of truths? Why not an epistle for that matter, given that we already have three of them out of that stable in our New Testament canon? Put otherwise, what was it about the gospel genre that so suited John's purpose?

I tentatively suggest the following as one possible answer to that question: a gospel was the ideal medium through which John could effectively echo and engage with the plight of a readership rejected and threatened with death by hostile Jews.<sup>23</sup> Let us stay with that thought for a moment and consider the Gospel that lies before us.<sup>24</sup> For John, the parallels with Jesus' story were already to hand—and he could make the most of that by setting as much of the action as possible in Judea, that area where Jesus' own life was constantly under threat from those Jews who opposed him. We note, for example, that John's narrative is distinctive in that he puts the Temple incident up-front in ch. 2. He may have had a number of reasons for doing so, but surely one of them was that he could set the tone of menace in a Jerusalem setting right at the outset of the ministry.<sup>25</sup> What is also distinctive about John's narrative is that as the centrepiece of his work, the great hinge of his gospel plot that will cost Jesus his life, he has chosen to place the raising of Lazarus. Crafted with an eye to the apocalyptic picture in

22. For the influential thesis that the Gospel is underpinned by special Judean traditions, see Dodd 1963: 244-47.

23. It is important to recognize that not all of John's 'Jews' are hostile and that the only 'Jews' specified in John's trial scene are authorities, not crowds; see North 2010: 218-19.

24. I refer here strictly to the Gospel as we now have it, which I take to be a second edition in which John has inserted new material and also transposed existing material; for detail, see Lindars 1972: 50-51, 380-81; see also n. 7 above.

25. So also John Ashton, who argues that one likely reason for the evangelist's transposition of the temple episode was to alert his readers to interpret the whole of Jesus' public career as lived out under the shadow of the cross (2007: 337-38).

5.28-29, this miracle, in which Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, conveys the assurance that those who die, who believe in Jesus, will be raised to life by him at the eschaton.

## The Raising of Lazarus

And so we return to the Lazarus story which, I have implied, was placed centre-stage by John to showcase the reward awaiting those who give their lives for their faith.<sup>26</sup> John has chosen from the miracles tradition he knew (cf. 20.30-31) a story of Jesus raising someone from the dead and has re-told it in such a way that it comes to signify a truth about Jesus. That truth is embedded in the narrative in Jesus' declaration to Martha that he is the resurrection and the life for those who believe, who now possess life that death cannot vanquish (11.25-26), and the miracle when it comes does not disappoint, with Lazarus emerging alive from the tomb in answer to Jesus' call to be released by him from the trappings of death (11.43-44). John's readers, already familiar with the apocalyptic tradition contained in 5.28-29, can scarcely have missed the point: this is a sign of what will take place on Judgment Day for those who remain faithful to Jesus.

It is at this level of eschatological significance, I suggest, that the two aspects of this story which prompted our investigation in the first place seem to make best sense. First, in the anguished words 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died', uttered by both Martha and Mary (11.21, 32), I suspect that John has sought to give voice to his readers' dashed hopes over the delay of the parousia, their distress as they face the reality of death in their midst in the absence of Jesus. This brings us to the second aspect of the story, which is Jesus' response—or rather, the lack of it—to the news of Lazarus's illness (11.6), behaviour that John was so anxious to ensure his readers did not take amiss (11.5). Why does Jesus remain where he is? What is he waiting for? Earlier moments of deliberate delay in the Gospel have been explained as Jesus waiting for his 'hour' or his 'time' (2.4; 7.6, 8) which, as the story unfolds, turns out to be a reference to his death. Yet no such explanation is forthcoming in this case. What we can draw on, however, both from these earlier examples and also from John's presentation generally, is that Jesus never does anything on his own authority but constantly waits upon the will of God (see, for example, 4.34; 5.30; 7.16-17; 8.28, 29; 12.48-50). I suspect that this is also the point here and that, before this sign of the eschaton, John has briefly pictured Jesus waiting for

26. I find less than convincing the claim by Esler and Piper that death from natural causes is part of the problem, taking their cue from the fact that the Lazarus story involves death from illness; see Esler and Piper 2006: 107-108, 111. In my view, this approach equates the medium (the miracle story) too strictly with the message it is intended to signify. On this logic, one could proceed to equate Lazarus's return to life with resurrection to eternal life—which it patently is not (cf. Jn 12.10).

God—God who alone can determine the day or the hour, as Mark has it—to appoint the time of his return. If this is so, then John has sought to assure his readers in the absence of Jesus that Jesus loves his own and knows their plight<sup>27</sup> and will surely return in God's good time. In the meantime, as Jesus' words to Martha confirm, eternal life is theirs through belief in Jesus, and so to face death is to do so in the utter assurance that they will be raised to life by him on Judgment Day. Once again, as with the final discourse material in chs. 15 and 16, John has produced the stuff of martyrdom.

## Conclusion

I will close with two brief examples from the reception history of the Gospel. In this article, I have placed the raising of Lazarus in the context of John's strategy of consolation for those facing death on account of their faith in Jesus. How John's original readership responded to this message we cannot know. What we do know, however, is the extent to which John's story very quickly fulfilled this consolatory role among succeeding generations of believers. Charles Hill records that the raising of Lazarus is portrayed no fewer than 53 times among paintings in the catacombs, some of which are found in the earliest sections. As Hill himself comments, 'The story of Lazarus, with its revelation of Jesus as "the resurrection and the life" ... held an obvious meaning for Christians in the face of death' (2004: 156-57).

My second example is about bereavement. This brings us full circle to where this article began, with the anguished words of Martha and Mary as they gave expression to their grief following Lazarus's untimely death. On returning to this aspect of John's story, I have suggested that John had intended the sisters' distress to resonate with his persecuted readers' own experience and also that he had gone out of his way to assure them that, in the lapse of time before the parousia, Jesus loved his own and knew their plight. At this point, I turn to the work of Rudyard Kipling. In addition, I must apologize to all Kipling enthusiasts, since it was only recently that I discovered that Kipling had been responsible for many of the words that were engraved on public monuments after the First World War, and poignantly so in that Kipling himself had lost a son in that conflict. As we shall see, Kipling also derives consolation from John's text, not from the Lazarus story this time but from another of John's scenes that has figured in this investigation. Here is the end of a short story Kipling published in 1926:

A man knelt behind a line of headstones—evidently a gardener, for he was firming a young plant in the soft earth. She went towards him, her paper in her hand. He rose at her approach and without prelude or salutation asked: 'Who are you looking for?'

27. This is echoed in the narrative where Jesus' grief for love of Lazarus answers that of Mary (11.35-36).

‘Lieutenant Michael Turrell—my nephew,’ said Helen slowly and word for word, as she had many thousands of times in her life.

The man lifted his eyes and looked at her with infinite compassion before he turned from the fresh-sown grass toward the naked black crosses.

‘Come with me,’ he said, ‘and I will show you where your son lies.’

When Helen left the cemetery she turned for a last look. In the distance she saw the man bending over his young plants; and she went away, supposing him to be the gardener.<sup>28</sup>

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